THE EXQUISITE PERDITA

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GAINSBOROUGH'S FAMOUS PORTRAIT
OF THE EXQUISITE PERDITA ROBINSON

The Exquisite Perdita

By

E. Barrington

Author of "The Chaste Diana," "The Divine Lady," "Glorious Apollo," Etc.

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THE EXQUISITE PERDITA

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CHAPTER I

THE EXQUISITE PERDITA

To be beautiful, with a nature strung like the Æolian harp vibrating to every sigh of sensibility, to be a player at whose feet the town flings its garlands and plaudits, to be a poet, to depict the joys and sorrows of love with a pen dipped in all the most fashionable colours—was not this, as the famous Admiral Boscawen observed, too much sail for one small vessel to carry, and shall we be surprised that she was swept out of her course and foundered, or seemed to do so, in the ocean of passion?

She told a small part of her own story to the world, quitting the subject when it became delicate, and it would need telling had she given the whole, for how is it possible that a woman should autobiographize? Few men have attempted it, and even to their unblemished sincerity who dare swear? And as for a woman—Lord help us! The poor Perdita cannot but court sympathy as to a judge who could not be inexorable if he did but know all, who must somehow therefore be won over as counsel for the defence. She tells what she will of her own story so fluently that you shall not have the leisure to note the hiatus here, the contradiction there. How indeed should you, with a cheek adorable pressed to yours, a bosom

breathing the perfume and luxuriance of a summer rose leaning confidentially against your shoulder?

No, her story is a confidence, not an affidavit. And even were it one, more is needed.

For why? She could not cope with her own personality nor understand it; she knew little more than the charming outside which the mirror presented with a thousand embellishments. Was she heaven, or heaven reflected merely in a pond? Could she be a sinner, she wondered often inwardly? Certainly the Social Order supported by the Seventh Commandment must sneer or look askance at her. And yet—yet! How is it possible to know of so complex a self, and compounded with Irish blood to make it more enigmatic, whether it is saint or sinner?

"I have not a notion," says she one day in a sob, "whether I was a martyr or a wretch. But there were excuses of the most melting. And yet—"

You see these fatal "and yets."

So if her picture of herself in the little she wrote appear vain and self-conscious beneath the studied simplicity, remember she was her own heroine and depicted the person she most loved and admired—save only one other. She felt herself made for triumphs and took the world for audience, therefore you are to picture her always on the stage, swaying gently to the storm of applause, or fluttering a cobweb handkerchief across deep-lashed eyes that seem to weep their gratitude for approbation. You will not surprise her off the stage in her own brief story. It will be much if I can so catch her for a moment in mine.

And sure it adds a touch of irony to her adventures that she was the pupil of the great, the reverend, the awful Mrs. Hannah More and her sisters. Never were lessons turned to odder account, though it is to be asserted that their relish in a manner abided with her to

the end, even if merely as a confusing element in the decisions she was obliged to make.

The poor Perdita—her childhood was bewildering enough in all conscience! Born in a prosperous home she draws a gauzy veil over her father's business, who may be strongly suspected of being a merchant instead of the scion of a noble race as his daughter would have us think. Yet a romantic merchant, for all, as befits the father of a heroine, and born an American, to which wild strain she attributed his passion for insane adventure. For will it be credited that when she was in her ninth year he must needs quit his prosperities for the romance of whale-fishing off the coast of Labrador in the hope of raising the neighbouring Esquimaux to a high state of civilization and thus conferring honour on his native land.

Perdita gently deplores the romantic notions of "this misguided parent" as she fondly terms him, but go he would, and to quote her again,—"While my mother's heart beat with sorrow and palpitated with apprehension, the dreadful secret was unfolded, and the cause of my misguided parent's silence was discovered to be a new attachment—a mistress, whose resisting nerves could brave the stormy ocean and who had consented to remain two years with him in the frozen wilds of America."—Mrs. Darby having sensibly declined the whales and the Esquimaux for her young family, if indeed she was ever invited to share them.

It must here be owned that though Mrs. Darby was wholly unimaginative and respectable, the daughter, passing her over, inherited a strong spice of the misguided parent, whom she alternately describes as "the dupe of his passions" and "the soul of honour." Yet as no remittances arrived from him for his young family the mother was obliged to look very seriously about her for some means to feed them, the whales having swallowed all

their subsistence. She set up a feeble little school for genteel accomplishments, and after a few years was doing feebly well with it, when Mr. Darby unexpectedly returned for a brief visit to England, still with the unmentionable lady in tow.

"The pride of his heart was deeply wounded" by the fact of this odious attempt at honest labour. "A prouder heart," cries his daughter with enthusiasm, "never palpitated in the breast of man!" Indeed it must be allowed that these were confusing standards for a girl of her age. However, the school had to be instantly disbanded, and his temper being violent, his remittances scanty, and the other lady his open companion, nothing was left to his wife but to "endure her sorrows with rectitude" and look about her once more.

On consideration she saw that Perdita's case was urgent, though the other children could wait. She was not fourteen, in the perfection of childish beauty, and reciting her little verses and stories with such delightful ease and grace that hope suggested the theatre for her career. But here again Mr. Darby intervened. He was on the wing for America again, with "assurances of good will" (and nothing more) for his family, and these awful words at parting to his wife.

"Take care that no dishonour falls upon my daughter. If she is not safe at my return I will annihilate you!"

Poor Mrs. Darby heard and trembled. The theatre was no school for virtue and her husband had already demonstrated that he could swoop across the Atlantic to some purpose! And supposing—supposing— No, she did not dare. The theatre would never do. Already dangerous eyes were fixed on Perdita and letters fluttering in at her windows, for the London of King George the Third was no place for needy beauty. There was only

one way. A husband became an absolute necessity. The richer the better, but a husband at all cost.

She sounded very cautiously about her, especially through an attorney, a Mr. Wayman, who might be supposed to know the circumstances of his friends. He had the very man on hand, a young Mr. Robinson, nephew to a rich and doting uncle, susceptible to just such loveliness as Perdita's now sixteen year old charms, and a meeting was arranged at the Star and Garter at Greenwich.

How could he resist her? Says Perdita:

"I remember I wore an evening gown of pale blue lustring, with a chip hat trimmed with the same colour. Never was I dressed so perfectly to my own satisfaction. I anticipated a day of admiration. To me it was a day of fatal victory."

But victory and the rich husband were secured, as Mrs. Darby fondly hoped, and Perdita married when she was but sixteen.

Even here she must represent herself as fifteen—(a touching age at which to commence married woman)—and as she was but turned of sixteen, might have omitted that stroke of pathos as unneedful. But though Mr. Robinson's goods made a fine show in the shop-window, as the saying is, and might have led a more experienced angler than Mrs. Darby to suppose him a gold-fish, he was, as a matter of fact, a waiter on Providence. No occupation, no solid expectations, the illegitimate son of a miser the most repellent. And she a girl of family and breeding! Indeed 'twas her mother's doing and the husband never more than an encumbrance. Girl of sixteen as she was, still it can be felt that she measured the man, wearied and passed on. She had parts and he none. For a while she struggled to honour as well as obey, and with desperate efforts sought to lift the weight of lead and clay to the empty throne in her heart. No; it was

too heavy a burden for such slender arms, and laughing half bitterly at herself and him, she dropt it.

But let the ill-assorted couple speak for themselves.

They were in the sitting room in Newman Street, London—rooms which he permitted her mother to share with his wife, for the sufficing reason that her lean purse might help his out. Why not? A mother must pay for the pleasure to be with her daughter, though it was convenient in his frequent absences to have some responsible person about a young wife who drew all eyes.

Mr. Robinson sat in the easiest chair with his long legs stretched out before him, his fair hair in a club, and a vinous good-humour about him that spoke also in the floridity of his cheeks and the precocious heaviness of jaw and chin. He watched his wife's movements with dull indifference.

Perdita (her name was truly Mary, but 'tis sunk in "Perdita" for reasons to be mentioned later) was dressed that morning in a white dimity *déshabille* with rose ribbons, and the warm May sun shining in at the dingy windows shot gold gleams in the dark of her hair, and lit up the scarlet bloom of her lips than which no woman ever had more beautiful. She held a bunch of daffodillies in her hand and was setting them in water, and Mr. Robinson thought he had never seen her so handsome, yet wondered why in the world it had ever moved him to undertake the cares of the married state.

He had not spent the night at home and only lately lounged in, and now after watching idly awhile, called to his wife to mill him a dish of chocolate.

"We have only tea," she says dryly, keeping on with the daffodillies. "Chocolate is a thing my mamma and I never see."

"It's a thing a gentleman can't do without, however."

He felt in his pockets and, producing a crown, flung

it on the table. "Run to Pelissier's, my girl, and get what you may for this. We had a wet night at the Cocoa-tree and I need a refresher. Grilled bones at two and the devil's luck with the cards and no breakfast. Don't linger!"

Still she paid no heed. She completed her task of sticking in the flowers and then sat down, leaving the crown on the table.

He stopped in the midst of a yawn and stared at her with a pair of blue eyes that might have been handsome if not bloodshot.

"Good Ged! Didn't you hear what I said, Madam? Do you grow deaf? Go out to Pelissier's and return with speed."

Leaning forward, she took up the crown, and with a school-boy twist of her arm flung it out of the window, and sat looking at him. You could never suppose this was the drooping sylph of her memoirs, she did it so defiant, and with an expression quite unbecoming the lady all tears and martyrdoms she there depicts for us in such moving terms.

The gentleman was perfectly confounded. It served her turn as well as if she had boxed his ears for him, as for a penn'orth she might! It was in her eye and the swing of her arm.

A moment elapsed and they stared like two dogs walking round each other on tiptoe with a gleam in a wary eye and hackles upstanding.

Her silence was so alarming that at last, baring his teeth, he dashed to the attack.

"I can assure you, Madam, that crowns are none so plenty with me but what you'll pay dear for the loss of this. May I enquire your reason for this vulgar folly?"

"Reason! I could set you a score. That you drink, dice, and bet; that instead of turning yourself to any

useful occupation, you lounge through the days and nights—but possibly these four suffice without the remaining sixteen."

It must be owned that Mr. Robinson presented a poor figure on this recital. He reddened and cleared his throat and for the life of him could plot no rejoinder. There was a new air about his wife—a something that cried "Beware" in a language of the most forcible. All she said was, however:

"Till now, Mr. Robinson, I have never said a word but what became a wife. And I don't suppose I have ever thought a thought that suited the character. How should a wife feel? I really don't know. I mean now to match my words and thoughts more exactly."

"Speak on, my dear, and say what pleases you?" said he, with a forced laugh. "I know it eases a woman to unbosom herself and get rid of the inflammable stuff burning within. Speak on. My back's broad enough to bear it."

"Sir, since we married, three wretched years agone, I have been a faithful wife to you. I have been your companion in a debtor's prison. I have endured poverty and the rebuffs of your odious family, and you have thrown me into the company of men whose interest you hoped would serve you, heedless of any risk to a young woman thought not uncomely. If I must condescend on particulars I name Mr. Fitzgerald and could give more. If I have kept on the path of honour it is no thanks to any protection I had from you. And—"

"I am aware my faults have always been put under the magnifying glass—a husband must expect that—and my virtues—"

"If you will specify them, sir, I shall be happy to meditate on them. It will afford me occupation during the days and nights you spend with Miss Wilmot."

The blood rushed into his face so that for a second she feared an apoplexy and half rose from her chair. In a voice thick with passion, and with a horrid imprecation, he asked who had been her informant.

"One who very well knew the facts," said Perdita, with a toss of her lovely head—"and if I forbear to give you the name 'tis because I would not dry up the source of such useful information. Meanwhile, I have spoke with the lady—"

"You have spoke with her?" His confusion and fury were pitiable, but Perdita was not at the moment accessible to pity. She went on remorseless.

"Spoke. And if I must needs choose between two disagreeables, I prefer her company to yours, sir. She had at least the grace to blush and offer to return my ring, which I saw upon her finger. I refused with scorn which was more for the unworthy man who bestowed it than for her."

When a man cannot silence his wife by reasoning, his resort is usually bluster, and Mr. Robinson blustered with the best. 'Tis the only way to deal with a weak creature that makes herself inconvenient. Perdita, so far from being alarmed, listened impassive, even smiling at the threat that she should see no more of the gentleman's money, but might beg her bread in the street if she would. It became evident to Mr. R. that the enemy had reinforcements he suspected not. He stopped abruptly in mid career. A man would not willingly be more ridiculous than nature made him.

"If I conclude this interesting conversation, Mr. Robinson," says she, " 'tis only because I have an appointment which can't be neglected. It is now a quarter to twelve, and at noon a gentleman waits on me whose overtures I am considering—"

"Good Ged, Madam! to your husband's face!" He

started up in as great a fury of righteous indignation as if he had not a blot on his own scutcheon. She continued, imperturbable:

"Whose overtures I am considering for my appearance on the stage. It is my intention to support myself in future and to live with my mother, leaving you to the company of Miss Wilmot and her like."

To describe his mortification would be impossible. A man may maltreat and neglect his wife and, so long as she takes it patiently, still retain a certain liking for her, but the moment she seeks independence and ceases to be the creature of his bounty he springs apart and dislikes and fears her. 'Tis to see the domestic cat take to the woods and no longer come purring for her alms of milk. Who is to tell what scratches the velvet paw may deal? Indeed this conversation was an earnest of it. No doubt her courageousness of reproach came entirely from the belief that she need no longer depend on him for the means of existence. It may be an interesting speculation how much of the harmony of marriage is based on that fear, and how much lesser a part the little blind god plays in it than the good common-sense of the law that makes a woman her husband's chattel to use as he will.

For a moment he was dumb, then returned to the attack.

"And who is the man who dares to come between husband and wife—"

The maid, at that moment flinging open the door, supplied an answer by announcing "Mr. Sheridan," and disclosing that gentleman on the threshold.

With feminine dissimulation Perdita was at once easy and elegant in her chair, from which she rose smiling to receive him. Mr. Robinson, red and sullen with mortification, rose also, holding by the back of his, and bowed

awkwardly to the consummate ease of Mr. Sheridan's greeting.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was at this time twenty-five years of age, and as handsome, easy and conquering as the world has since known him. Indeed the contrast between the two men was very striking, the one all elegance and readiness, the other sullen, suspicious and watchful. He made some kind of a greeting, however, seeing Sheridan did not for the moment recognize him, and pushed a seat gruffly to the guest.

"Sure, Madam, I need not inquire after your health when I see you in such charming looks!" says Mr. Sheridan, flirting a perfumed handkerchief. "It encourages me to hope a favourable reception for my proposal, for such beauty can't be insensible. You have considered of it?"

Perdita bridled sweetly, while her proprietor humphed and grumphed in his corner.

"Why, Sir, it was so flattering as almost to deprive me of reason. But, to be candid, I so distrust my qualifications that—"

"Qualifications, Madam! The first is beauty. An audience that is a lover will not be too critical of the lovely creature blushing and trembling before it on her first appearance. And then—"

"Then what, Sir?" says Perdita, with a killing glance. "Sure, like all other lovers, not to mention husbands, it finds beauty palls and desires some other attractions which may not be available, and I doubt I possess them."

"Available! Why, Madam, let me run off a list of your charms that shall not shock even your modesty. Item—but who, may I ask, is this silent gentleman?"

Mr. Robinson, overpowered by his easy impudence, was still in a fixed and furious silence.

Perdita presented him, smiling agreeably.

"I believe you have forgot my husband, Mr. Sheridan. You told me you knew him as a boy. This is he."

"Sir, your most obedient! 'Twould be impossible to say how long it has been my desire to meet the happiest man in England, and to find I have the happiness to know you already is an additional delight. I have the honour to salute you and congratulate you on the possession not only of every charm and grace in your lady that an indulgent nature can bestow but also of a future of splendid affluence in her talents."

It was always said that Mr. Sheridan knew how to adapt himself to his audience better than any man living and with premeditation divined instinctively where to strike suspicion and turn it to his own purposes. But possibly he might form some idea of the situation from previous confidences with the lady.

An air of doubt softened Mr. Robinson's brow, which further relaxed into a smile, as Mr. Sheridan proceeded.

" 'Tis easy to comprehend that Mr. Robinson, lost in contemplation of so lovely a person, may not have realized that his jewel has many facets. Sir, I have heard your lady recite Shakespeare to admiration, and it is my considered opinion that were the Bard himself present to give his verdict, he would say, 'Seek no further. Here is my imagined Juliet.' "

"Lord!" says Mr. Robinson, alike overwhelmed by the intelligence and the overbearing ease of Mr. Sheridan. "But a young, untried woman—devoid of a theatrical education! Sure it can't be possible."

"Sir, you allow not for the Promethean spark of genius! Look at the sensibility in that attitude, the fire in those sparkling eyes, and pronounce whether I know my business as a manager or no,—and still better, hear her recite a passage or two, and, casting aside the adoring husband, listen critically (if such can be critical!)

and say whether Verona and Juliet rise not before your imagination!"

Of the fire of Perdita's eyes Mr. Robinson had no manner of doubt; he had been scorched by it in the late conversation; of the rest he doubted very critically, and suspected still whether these ardours might not relate more to the beauty of the lady than to her abilities as a player.

But yet—"a splendid affluence"—how melodious did the words ring to a man but lately emerged from a debtor's prison. If a means could indeed be found which should turn her looks to account without subjecting him to the last humiliation, no messenger from heaven could be more welcome than Mr. Sheridan. He pulled himself together and put on an air of good humour.

"Why, Sir, you will have to excuse some doubt in so great an occasion, for though I have often heard Mrs. R. spouting and mouthing verses for her amusement I am not by way of being an amateur of poetry myself, and made no more of it than a lady's whim. But if it be so—what say you to a bumper of claret to drink success to the enterprise."

What did Mr. Sheridan ever reply to such an offer but yes, and that with a face of gaiety that warmed the wine as effectually as ever the sun its grapes.

It was produced, and Perdita, all smiles, served them with her own fair hands, and at Mr. Sheridan's entreaty touched the rim of his glass with her own coral lips ere he cried:

"A health and success to the new, the inimitable Juliet!" and tossed off the remainder.

This done, Mr. Robinson graciously withdrew, on her assurance that she could go through her scene the better without the agitation of his presence, and presently from the window seat she saw him strolling down into the

Oxford Road, his hat tipped a little on one side, and ogling the pretty ladies tripping along to their morning business, with his usual assiduity. His good humour was for the time assured.

"So pensive, Madam!" cries Sheridan. "Did I not enter on a little domestic disturbance when I walked on so opportune? Trust me to know the signals! Be frank with me, Juliet. I may be the more service to you. Does Adam desire to keep his Eve a prisoner in Eden, or will he permit her to shine on the world outside?"

"Eden!" says Perdita, with a shrug and pout. "Oh, Mr. Sheridan, little do you guess what I suffer daily! Extravagance, infidelity, penury, and neglect— Well may I wish for independence if it brings peace with it. Are all men like this, I beseech you to tell me?"

"Why, there is a family likeness among them, child! The ancients, who had little to learn from the moderns, gave Cupid wings, and, when he has flown, the enforced companionship of a man and woman has difficulties to try the archangels!" He made a wry face and went on. "Oh, the involvements of marriage! If 'twas made in heaven, a mere man may say they botched their work to admiration and transferred our hopes to hell. But as to independence— Sure you are aware that all you earn is your husband's? The law, insensible to the artillery of the finest eyes in the world, so pronounces it."

"I know—I know," says Perdita, almost in tears. "But, Mr. Sheridan, is it necessary that my husband should learn the exact amount of my salary? Sure it must be possible that a woman's exertions should not go to support a rival!"

"The law throws its mantle over rivals and the peccadilloes of gentlemen, Madam, with a determined decency that does it infinite dishonour. It assumes that all husbands and fathers are the mirrors of justice and con-

tinence. But yet—it is indeed a hard case. Suppose the exact sum were known only to the manager and his Juliet, why then—"

She clasped his hand between her two little palms in a kind of rapture, so affected was she by this instance of consideration. Mr. Sheridan accepted the gentle pressure in the same good humour as the bumper of claret.

"Why, Madam," said he earnestly—"the man who would not aid a charming woman in distress deserves—" He completed the sentence with eyes as expressive as those of his own Joseph Surface. Indeed Mr. Sheridan may be thought later to have drawn a point or two in this character from the extremely just and liberal sentiments with which he himself draped his own unwillingness to disburse even the poor salaries of those he employed at Drury Lane. The surface there was gay with charming flowers and produced everything but bread for those who had given him their toil and confidence and had none else to look to. But Perdita, like every one else the captive of his charm, saw nothing but kindness and confidence in those agreeably smiling eyes and was content. She had reason to be, for Mr. Sheridan, like other men, could distinguish his friends from his mere dependents and use them accordingly.

A perfect understanding being thus established, she treated him to a few of the speeches of Juliet, charming every sense with her beauty and the melody of a voice sweet as a blackbird's in April. Indeed this lady was gifted to an uncommon degree, quick and vibrant as was her mind to echo all the tones of beauty.

They were thus engaged, when Mr. Sheridan, leaning against the window shutter in a glow of ease and pleasure, spied a figure advancing up the street and, flinging up the sash, waved to the gentleman beneath, crying:

"Mr. Garrick, your most obedient! What do you here

so early? Come up, man, up! and lose not a moment. Verona and Juliet await you at the top of the stairs!"

Without a word, Mr. Garrick seized the knocker and sent the echoes flying through the house and the maid speeding to the front door.

CHAPTER II

THE TEST

'Twas scarcely two minutes ere he presented himself, bowing, with Juliet, in her white dimity and rose ribbons, curtseying to the ground in dire alarm as the angry eyes of the wrinkled and wearied old man swept her in search of Sheridan.

"What do I here? Damn you, Sherry, you forget everything but your own convenience. Did you not ask me to meet you at the green-room to hear this lady? and when I arrive there I am told you are gone off to her residence? God knows you are regardless of your own appointments, yet might have some respect for other people's! Madam, I apologize, but Mr. Sheridan is such a damned careless dog that—"

Sheridan tossed rebuke aside gaily.

"That you do right to kick me and soundly, Sir. I forgot. I own it. I protest I'm vastly grieved, but you know what it is. You too were young once, Mr. Garrick, and know how the soft fire of a lady's eyes dissipates recollection. But now you are come, let's take advantage of the circumstance, and give Mrs. Robinson such a Romeo as she could never have hoped. Take the part, Sir!—when did you ever forget a line you had heard?—and teach our Juliet what inspiration means combined with training and experience."

Who could resist Sheridan? Not Garrick—not a living soul! Never a dupe in the world but crept to sun himself in those smiles the day after a disappointment. Could the

two Surfaces, Joseph and Charles, be combined, we possibly have their author, who projected each brilliant conception from a different facet of his many-sided character. There were many to rue the day they met him, and yet these poor fools would protest their belief and trust him again and yet again to the end.

Mr. Garrick, now retired from his triumphs, soberly well dressed in brown cloth breeches most unlike a Romeo, immediately faced his Juliet, who was placed behind a chair for her balcony—and 'twas little short of amazing to see the sedate London gentleman fade out of his many-wrinkled face and the ardent lover unbend his lips and shine in his eyes. Oh, miracle of genius! The words as he uttered them breathed all the perfumes of romance. The Italian night shed moonlit shadows over the hard daylight, and a voice more sweet than the nightingale's besieged the girl's ears with manly music.

He moved nearer, his hands pleaded for him, his whole being palpitated to her beauty, she leaning forward as though she could fly like a bird to those desired arms. Tears started to her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, beneath the magic of the two great masters, he who wrote and the speaker—the pleader!

She uttered her answers in a melodious sob with little sighs of love and longing, half swooning beneath the ecstasy, clinging to the rail for support—a swaying flower, a fruit ripe for the tasting. 'Twas too much felt, it could not be the best acting with her emotions so little under control, so the experienced player thought as he infused yet more passion into his thrilling voice, and Sheridan—Sheridan, with a hard bright eye on the main chance, yet thrilled himself as he listened, and for a moment—a moment only, forgot the cash-box.

They finished, and Perdita, clasping her hands, stood looking into Mr. Garrick's face, wordless. Yet he who so

loved approbation was satisfied. Her eyes had a language that dumbed speech.

"My dear Madam," he said, "'twas very well. Much to learn, no doubt, but the stuff is there. Self-control will come as you grow accustomed to the situation, for such emotions as you now feel are too unstable a foundation for a finished art and they must be held strictly in leash. With diligence—"

There she broke forth with passion.

"Diligence, Sir? I would toil night and day and for half a century, could I even hope to learn your secret! Oh, that dying fall in your voice when it's as though it could no more bear the load of feeling and so sinks into a silence yet more expressive. Was ever music like this? Oh, that look, with all love concentrated in its fire, and the veil as of unshed tears that obscures it—what shall I say? If I seem to rave, forgive me, for you show me the heights I can never climb! 'Tis a mingled joy and despair."

"Didn't I tell you, Sir!" cries Sheridan. "A sensitive soul and attuned to harmony! Now, Mr. Garrick, what return for such incense from such lips?"

He shot a laughing, challenging glance at the old man, who looked the older now that the sacred fire was quenched in ash once more. He replied, himself a little moved, as he leaned on his tortoise-shell cane:

"Why, Madam, your commendation pleases me, I own. But to business. For your own encouragement and Sherry's, let me sum up your assets and, for your sobering, your defects. To begin, you have the entirely satisfactory semblance. Your dark hair, your unusually large eyes which resemble violets in rain and so light up the face and command instant attention, the gravity and refinement of your expression, a certain melancholy which I am confident is but the background for the most spar-

kling smiles give me a notion that we may possibly have a tragedian in you as well as a sentimentalist. The figure is excellent—the length from waist to knee betokens, if I don't err, Sherry, a fine breeches figure, which is rare enough in the woman who can act. In any case, we have grace and dignity. And the voice has a piercing sweetness in certain passages, and at all times very moving. 'Tis a voice to match the face, dark, luscious, thrilling, if I make myself understood. The age also—nineteen, Madam, if I mistake not?—is perfection's self for Juliet. Were I dictator I would not admit a Juliet over five and twenty, and that the outside. 'Tis the misfortune of the character that it needs a virgin in her earliest bloom to illustrate it to the eye, and the experience of a passionate woman to produce it to the mind."

Perdita stood trembling and blushing to hear this catalogue of her perfections. She could have fallen at those knees and embraced them at each word he said. And 'twas the more ravishing that there was no wish to compliment or ingratiate—but a mere business inventory to be checked off on the fingers. But there was the other side to follow; he took a pinch of snuff and became didactic.

"Against this we must set inexperience. And if that sound a trifle let me say 'tis not so. I have known it an insuperable barrier. In a room, Madam, you can no more be ungraceful than a cat who, when she stretches herself languidly and yawns with small pink mouth displayed, is the epitome of female grace, as indeed in all her movements. But on the stage you will either bolt like a frightened rabbit or remain fixed like a mawkin. Lord bless me, the sights I have seen! Then again, your voice, sweet, as I have owned, in a room, will strain and crack when you try to get it over the footlights. 'Twill lose its velvet quality and become mere torn calico! I doubt you have the power needful for tragedy." So he con-

tinued on, as it seemed destroying brick by brick the edifice he had built up before, until at last he appeared like Time withering the very leaves of life and fluttering them to earth, and Perdita sank into a chair and sighed as if her poor heart would break.

"Speak for me, Mr. Sheridan!" she said almost on a sob. "Does Mr. Garrick mean I am nothing but a worthless beauty?"

Sheridan, leaning on the back of Mr. Robinson's chair and listening with grave attention to the man who knew his business, did not hear her question, and she was obliged to repeat it with fresh terrors added. He broke then into a sunshiny laugh.

"Why, Madam, whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth! Would Mr. Garrick waste ten minutes of his precious time and thoughts on any pretty fool? Not he. He means that he'll take you in hand himself and tutor you, because he knows you'll do him credit. Said I not right, Sir?"

"I never pledged myself to that or anything like it," says Garrick. "It was no part whatever of my intentions. I am now retired and if—"

"And if a lovely woman comes your way, all genius and sensibility, you'll make her what none but you can accomplish, Sir. Why, your Susannah Cibber, that you thought the world of, what was she compared to this adorable beauty—all starry eyes, and rose-red lips and perfections I dare not name lest we alarm her modesty. And this lady has Cibber's very voice that was her choice and special beauty. The first time she spoke her lines, says I to myself: 'Good God! Susannah Cibber, as I live!' And just now—wasn't she a virginal flame of passion? Who could believe her a married woman, with innocence wooing to be wooed in every gesture! Fie, for shame, Mr. Garrick, if you don't complete your own work and make her the finest Juliet that ever trod the boards!"

Perdita, taking the cue as if to the manner born, threw herself at his feet with uplifted hands.

"Oh, Sir, your greatness so daunts me that I have scarcely the voice to plead. But now you have shown me what acting is, I will kiss your feet that you shall tutor me. Oh, if you could but be my Romeo! Then I were certain to outsoar my own dulness. What is any young man compared to your genius that transcends time?"

"Brereton is a very pretty figure of a man, nevertheless!" says Garrick, looking over her head at Sheridan.

"Why, yes. He'll do. But see how she knows the true diamond from the mock sparkler. What the devil taught her that innate genius!"

"Madam, indeed you move me!" says the old gentleman, assisting his fair suppliant to rise and placing her in a chair. "And therefore—" Two passionate dark eyes entreated, though her lips were silent. "And therefore—yes, I know I'm wheedled and persuaded and all but coerced—therefore I'll tutor you."

Joy, relief, congratulations, flutterings!

"Good God," cries Sheridan, "need you ask, Mr. Garrick, if here's a face obedient to the heart within? Saw you ever a rainbow against a cloud more brilliant than that radiant joy,—the rain-drops in either eye dried by the sunlight of your bounty? Would it not bring down the house? Gad so!—I hear the thunders of clapping and cheers already, and see her receiving them as she looks now—all appealing humility and trembling joy! What the devil!—in the length and breadth of the country there isn't her like as she will be when the jewel has had the final polish from your lapidary hands."

Mr. Garrick was unmoved by these transports. Possibly he knew his Sheridan better than did Perdita, who believed him quite transported with emotion and herself the happy cause.

"I could now wish, before leaving, to hear Mrs. Robinson in a song," he said gravely. "Though not indispensable, 'tis a very desirable accomplishment for an actress. You sing, Madam?"

Perdita braced herself for the last ordeal.

"Passably, Sir, but I know not—"

"I'll strum the accompaniment!" cries Sheridan, opening the forte-piano. "What shall it be, Madam?"

She motioned to a sheet of music and took her stand beside him.

At the preliminary chords the old man's face softened, and when the pure soprano filled the room with words as dulcet: "Sweet! if you love me, smiling turn!"—he looked away from the charming face singing in every line as well as with heavenly parted lips, and forgot it, forgot her, as in memory and clearer than in life he heard the woman warble those honeyed words who had played with him in so many parts, whom the whole town had caressed and admired for her singing of that simple song when he and she were young together. Youth whispered in his ear, clasping the hand of memory, and he paid the two the tribute of silence when it ceased. But Sheridan, understanding, pressed her hand and she was satisfied.

"I must go now," he said, rising. "The morning has not been unprofitable, I believe, from any point of view. Do you follow or accompany me, Sir?"

"I follow and will overtake you, Sir," says Sheridan. "'Tis needful to make a list of appointments for your pupil that I'll submit to your goodness later. Allow me to attend you to the door." He did so, and on the lowest stair Garrick turned and looked him in the face.

"She'll do, Sherry—the girl will do. I wish she hadn't such looks for two reasons."

"And those, Sir?"

"Why, you know a woman with those eyes thinks more

of them than her wits, and when all the young dogs ogle her— Haven't I seen it a hundred times!"

"And the second reason, Sir?"

"Yourself, Sherry. Can you resist a pretty woman to whom your smile means success, your frown, ruin?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Garrick. What the devil d'ye mean by that insinuation? There's nothing—not a thought, not a tremor, I do assure you."

But the gratified laugh set the doubt deeper on Mr. Garrick's brow as he went slowly down the street, leaning on his cane. Sheridan ran lightly up the stair again.

"Did I do? was it failure—oh, was it failure?" cries Perdita, gloriously flushed and excited. "Oh, Mr. Sheridan, what a *darling* is Mr. Garrick! And you—what shall I say to you, to whom I owe all! Can anything ever be in my power with which to reward my benefactor, my protector! For if it is—"

"There's much in your power. Fill my theatre and drive out the demons, spite and disappointment, and I'll cry quits, fair lady! The balance against you is quite wiped out! And if you would have me the debtor in your place, give me one inestimable gift, and talk no more of favours from me."

"And the gift?" She looked up with large, sweet eyes of wonder.

"A kiss."

Half drawing back, with a wistful sweetness she tendered her hand, but 'twould not do. He held it indeed and kissed it, but stooped his handsome head, and touched her lips with his, at first lingeringly, then passionately. So they stood a moment or more, then drew apart, and Perdita asked hurriedly what days would be eligible for her lessons, and Sheridan answered quickly, and no further reference was made to that salute whereof the fire ran through both their veins. 'Twas scarce ten minutes

when, running, he overtook Mr. Garrick walking with gouty dignity down the road, grumbling at himself and Sheridan as he went because he had accepted the office of tutor.

"At my age to turn schoolmaster, forsooth! And to a pretty jilt that some macaroni will be cajoling off the stage before she begins to be useful! And she has all the accessories to vice—a bad husband, poverty, nineteen years, a melting eye— You've made a fool of me and yourself, Sir, and not the first time, neither!"

"Lord, Mr. Garrick, I've made inquiries, and the lady's of so cool a temperament that your reputation's perfectly safe in her hands. If any one is hurt by the recoil of his own piece, 'twill be the husband, and nature herself has no pity for a husband. How many of 'em have you ridiculed on the stage? And in private life—eh?"

Mr. Garrick smiled reminiscently, and they went off arm in arm. He was ductile in Sheridan's hands to the end of his days.

And Perdita, kneeling on the window seat, her heart tempestuous as the ocean with all her emotions, looked after him and knew not what she felt. 'Twas only the voice of Mr. Robinson with loud question and coarse congratulation that roused her and darkened all her illuminations. She was obliged, however, to compound with him for her liberty to play by agreeing that they should still be house-mates. She judged it worth the high price.

CHAPTER III

ON THE BRINK

It was the opinion of Mr. Sheridan, given after the lessons were begun, that the future player queen should show herself at Ranelagh, the Pantheon and other fashionable resorts, there to whet the appetite of the moneyed public for the brilliance so soon to dawn. Well he knew that her beauty and passion for the tasteful in attire must make her noticeable wherever she appeared. And certainly on her first shining at the Pantheon she was a figure to draw all eyes. Mr. Robinson, who had been brought to consider her as a profitable investment, had made a few little dabs of money lately at the cards and dice and, though unwillingly, bestowed some for the purpose of illustrating her perfections. Behold Perdita then, attended by her husband in all the forms of decorum, attired in a fashionable hoop distending a dress of pale pink satin bordered with a family relic of broad sable fur, and garnished with an elegant suit of point lace, a possession which poor Mrs. Darby rummaged from long unused stores of costly frippery: the head dressed enormous high with feathers curling their fleecy softness about it. The faint blush tint, the ruffled, petalled pomp of the wide skirt made her a rose indeed and the delicate dark face with its sweet contours and starry eyes sprang from the mellowed ivory of the lace like the perfect bloom of the cluster held up for ravishment of every sense. How many hours of close deliberate consideration had been consumed to attain that irresistible allurement? Impossible to say, and why ask? Who demands of the great artist how many years or min-

utes he devotes to his desired end? And this was an artistry near as fine in its way, but alas! perishable in its essence.

She would not touch her ivory cheeks with rouge. She knew her business too well. A touch, however, in the double curve of the upper lip spoke of the secrets of kisses, and accentuated the soft dimple—its adorable neighbour—when she smiled. Nor would she powder the hair that framed it all in midnight. Trust the lady to choose her weapons!

"Lord! you're a fine woman!" says Mr. Robinson, gazing at her half angry, half jealous, when she came undulating down the stair. "The beaux will all be staring you out of countenance. But I would have you, Madam, remember you're my wife and I know how to defend my honour!"

"Is not this rant a little unseasonable?" says Perdita, coolly drawing on her gloves,—"I go where I go not at my own desire but Mr. Sheridan's, and my dress is as much a part of the scheme as the public announcement that Mr. Garrick tutors the new Juliet. If it be your pleasure, however, I can remain at home and you represent me at the Pantheon. 'Tis only the ladies will stare at *you*, and we know that has no ill effects, for it will certainly not stir me to defend *my* honour!"

He looked at her uncomprehending—'twas a dull, big, handsome man at best—and led the way. He knew as well as she that it was no longer the down-trodden Griselda he attended. 'Twas a rising power, the dispenser of comfort, of luxuries, of all that made life endurable to his tastes, and though a man is the rightful possessor of all his wife's gains, it is yet in her power either to decline to earn or to grow sick, haggard, ugly, on his affronts and close the door that way also to his hopes. What! we feed and groom the race-horse who carries our colours at New-

market—shall we not humour the caprices of the less valuable creature also? As far as is reasonable?

The splendour of the Rotunda, gay with variegated lamps and garlands, beautiful with the passing of resplendent ladies in hoops and powdered heads dressed almost as high as the Tower of Babel, enthralled her with breathless delight. Their beaux were almost dwarfed beside their magnificence, and it excited her like the odour and bouquet of a new vintage. Consider!—scarce nineteen and so lately from the long gloom of a debtor's prison—was it condemnable? There was the fair Mrs. Baddely surrounded by her court—a fashionable Paphian indeed, every trill of her gay laughter a slight on strait-laced principles and the kill-joy virtues. There was the exquisite Lady Almeria Carpenter resembling a lovely porcelain with her delicate complexion and dress in the Watteau taste, brushing scornfully by Mrs. Baddely with a *frou-frou* of hoops and silks and feathers—she who had won his Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester's heart from his sad Duchess, the lovely Maria Walpole. Lovely still, the royal Maria sat on a sofa and watched her Duke with wistful eyes, possibly weighing the bitters of Royalty against its sweets, and brooding over the legal separation that was to be her only hope of peace. Like a handsome hawk towering to strike, the profligate Lord Lyttelton attended Mrs. Baddely and watched the Lady Almeria from the corner of his eye. What pretty woman could hope to escape it! But she returned only a coolly nonchalant stare, as keen on her own hunting trail as he on his, and each, respecting the other's robber purpose, passed on.

It was an epitome of London, nay, of the world, in little, and Perdita, as yet a newcomer in these enchanted circles, took possession of a sofa and composed her draperies and herself into the perfect picture. Needless to

say it attracted the eye of that finished connoisseur, my Lord Lyttelton. Mr. Robinson had deserted her for a few moments in the interests of refreshment and she sat alone —a circumstance in itself alluring. Indeed the question ran round the gay circle, "Who on earth is the fair stranger in pink satin and sables?"

She could hear it and bridled and blushed uneasily in an inward rage with her husband's desertion, when a man dressed in the highest *ton* advanced, bowing elegantly, and begged the favour of recalling himself to the lovely solitary's memory. She caught at him desperately, be he whom he might, and then remembered Lord Northington, a friend of the family in bygone days when her father still graced it, and rising, executed a prodigious curtsey. He fetched her a cup of tea—by no means a despicable cavalier in his bloom-colour and silver.

"'Twas a most unexpected good fortune to meet Mrs. Robinson here," says his Lordship, and pulled himself a chair, continuing: "And indeed for a moment I hesitated—for—if her modesty will permit the allusion—the almost child of some years since has improved on us into such a beauty as even in this gay galaxy shines transcendent. But I could not forget that dimple and the little haughty nose, and least of all those great eyes!"

It was not offensively said and reminiscence may be indulged in a paternal friend. The dimple deepened and my Lord Lyttelton drew nearer as if drawn by an invisible cord. He could not hear the conversation, but it roused his jealousy to see the head bent so confidential to Lord Northington and the charming lips murmuring words he would have scattered guineas to win. Yet they were harmless enough. Only an account of her troubles, lightened by the new hopes which sent her to the dangerously attractive Pantheon. Indeed she was so engrossed that she scarcely perceived the approach of the designer.

"Have the goodness to present me, my Lord," says a subdued voice, and looking up she saw herself reflected in two bold eyes trained for assault and capitulation.

"Why, my Lord Lyttelton!" says Lord Northington coolly, not best pleased at the interruption. No use! A master-hand at the game will always win, and in five minutes the later comer was in possession of the sofa and the ear of the lady, and Lord Northington eclipsed and silenced.

Not that Perdita was attracted. Let us be just. His Lordship's creed was that every woman is not only at heart a rake but loves the species, and all his looks and remarks were addressed to this hidden libertine. They missed their mark, however, unless the traitor were present in the citadel, and as yet there was none here. She beheld him with a distaste only overawed by his rank and with a faltering hand kept the talk on the safe level, asking the name of this or that luminary who wandered past them on a celestial orbit, as strange to her yet as any planet's.

"And that pretty lady?" says she, desperately, to cut short a too intimate compliment, indicating an approaching figure in white satin. His Lordship laughed triumphant.

"A cast flirt of my own, Madam. A lady to whom I opened the first pages of the Book of Love and who has read in it since with many,—Mrs. Grandon. But I dare assure you she has never regretted the preface. Observe her diamonds, she salutes me!"

He rose and bowed; with a smile that was an insult, and as he did so, two very young men came up a lane of fashionables which cleared itself for their passage, both bowing slightly right and left, and the elder of the two, addressing the elderly and Honourable Mrs. Boscawen, invited her to seat herself with him on a sofa opposite to that of Perdita.

"Who is that, my Lord?" she whispered, as the two slid into easy talk and laughter.

"Innocence! Affected or real?" replied he with a bold leer. "I did not think there was a woman in London but knew the Prince of Wales! No, Madam,—eyes off! hands off! 'Tis high treason to look at him with those wondering bewildering glances. He is in tutelage to parents as stiff, as straitlaced as the ogres of a fairy tale, and no pretty woman may come within earshot of him on pain of the Tower. Look t'other way instantly."

But how was it possible she should do so? Her future king, a Prince as romantic as any in the fairy tales his Lordship quoted,—not yet of age, handsome, well shaped, his powdered hair setting off the clear youthfulness of his complexion, he sat there, the mark for all eyes, and, though young, as easy and unconcerned as though all the fair faces bending his way were but flowers in a garden, and he the indifferent sun shining on all alike. He laughed and his eyes danced and beamed. ("The pretty boy!" says Perdita enraptured.) A gentleman in the gazing crowd saluted him, and the polite bow that recognized his homage was grace itself. She watched, adoring, the young son of a hundred Kings, and trembled half pitying to think of the awfulness of the crown that shadowed so young a brow! All her romantic fancy dressed the princely lad with a hundred rainbows; half-forgotten lines of poetry hovered on her lips—young Hotspur, the fifth Harry, and Lord knows what! the poet in her dreaming awake as she watched him with enthralling interest, marvelling how the world must seem from such a high sky-window—marvelling she scarce knew what. My Lord Lyttelton—everything was forgotten in the touching spectacle. And suddenly the young royal eye caught her fixed gaze of wonder and worship. It is probable Perdita had never looked so beautiful as in that moment of soft

wonder and self-forgetfulness, for he broke off in what he said, and leaning forward gazed at her earnestly as if half dazzled, the blood flushing in his cheeks. Remembrance returned instantly, and blushing scarlet in her turn she averted her eyes and was Mrs. Robinson once more, stiff and convicted of a *faux pas* in the best society in Europe.

"You seem struck with our future King truly, Madam!" says Lord Lyttelton. "A handsome boy, is it not? But kept up as prim as a young Miss at boarding school. Never was greater folly! For every hour they drill him now he'll be revenged by a year of dissipation. His brother, the Bishop of Osnaburg, has it in his eye also. I dare swear in two years they'll be a pair of finished young rakes. That is their sour-faced governor coming this way. Rat me, if I don't pity the lads!"

But Perdita was sick of the man and his readiness. She rose with what dignity she could muster and a rapid curtsey, and made off to her husband whom she spied with a group of men; Lord Lyttelton following that he might secure his introduction to the proprietor of so much beauty—a rite never to be neglected in his code.

Mr. Sheridan was among them and at her side in a moment.

"You are tired, Madam—moved? What is it?"

"Oh, Mr. Sheridan, deliver me from this hateful man!" says she aside. "His every look is an insult. I feel myself outraged and—"

"Yes, but, Madam, though the man's a foul brute still we are to make allowance for the temptation of so much beauty. Sure it makes all the world adorers. Did I not see the Prince's eye caught like a wasp in honey!"

She blushed again, but essayed a laugh.

"Mr. Sheridan, your genius speaks you a poet as well as a wit. Doesn't something stir under your embroidered

waistcoat when you see that young man and consider what he is or will be? I vow it touches me."

"You're right, Madam, and your sensibility adorns you. Yes,—'tis like Banquo's vision reversed. Not only the Kings to be, but those that have been, attend him,—majestic ghosts crowned and ermined. Now, here's a lure for you!—Surpass all our fondest hopes on the great day, transcend all in power as you do in beauty, and one night your future King shall sit in the royal box and lose himself in your tears and laughter and applaud like the humblest wretch in the gallery, and you shall feel that the greatest of men is subject to your power."

He laughed, little knowing what the future held for him and for her also. She smiled faintly and the thing dropped, but when they returned to Newman Street her busy fancy had already begun to weave itself in words far less beautiful than the lips that shaped them:

"Young noble scion of the Royal race,
Bright star of honour, Knight of stainless pride."

Poor enough, you see! But why continue? Grace of course must rhyme with race, and beside with pride, and this gentleman was to be the mark of all such attentions for many a year to come. What matters a girl's doggerel? Her heart—but of that she was yet unconscious.

CHAPTER IV

PURSUIT

This evening at the Pantheon, followed by others at equally gay resorts, was to make Perdita very much the mode even before she graced the boards. She was the recipient of so many attentions, strictly dishonourable, that Mr. Sheridan almost doubted his own wisdom in permitting her appearance a day before the fixed one in which she was to appear as Juliet, and this in spite of the burning curiosity and interest which now awaited it.

For who in the world can reckon on female vanity, and in her case not only on vanity, but the love of luxury and of material advantage? What if she deserted him for one of the many establishments at her command? She had but to raise that pretty finger, and pouf!—his theatrical dream was shattered! Sherry's keen eye early detected Mr. Robinson as a vicious fool without even the saving grace of charm to back his folly. He was also aware, and did not spare Perdita the knowledge, that Miss Wilmot had had a costly successor, and surely a young and handsome woman cursed with such a husband needs a strong guard to protect the lamb from the wolves and their glistening teeth! So Mr. Sheridan, though no Corydon, undertook the office of shepherd. It included that of confidant, for it was impossible the poor Perdita should not pour her cares into some friendly bosom, and she was by no means one who sought or was sought by her own sex though she had as valuable and respectable an acquaintance as any. But in spite of that remembered kiss the friendship was unblemished as yet—possibly his

heart was not yet wholly disengaged from his wife—the fair St. Cecilia of Sir Joshua's noblest picture where, attended by angels less lovely than herself, she inspires the world with music.

Be that as it may, he was a valuable support on Perdita's slippery path—more so than any woman could be. He fostered her detestation of Lord Lyttelton with instances of his brutishness that closed her doors against that indignant peer.

When the Duke of Rutland offered a settlement of six hundred pounds per annum for her smiles, with *carte blanche* as to residence, it was not to her husband but to Sheridan she turned, and he composed the polite billet in which the distinction was refused. And so with many nameless others, for if indeed the truth were to escape as to the personages who were at Perdita's feet even before her appearance as a player, the peace of many a noble and wealthy house would be ablaze, and none the less so because of the Sheridan wit in the repulses administered.

So his attentions grew more flattering as the husband's died out in utter neglect, and it is very possible that but for his delightful company the temptations that assailed her might have been more tempting.

"Gods, how engaging she is!" sighed Mr. Sheridan to himself one day when they waited for Mr. Garrick and Romeo in the green-room. She had attended a masquerade at the Haymarket the night before, the gayest of the gay, and now lay back in her chair half happy, half wearied, with long black lashes on the soft ivory of her cheeks. She looked much younger than her nineteen years and had an air of unsullied sweetness that belied her unfortunate marriage and sordid experience. It is marvellous how a woman of feeling may go through such mud and keep her garments unspotted. You shall think her an innocent who hears a story read of which she cannot guess

the foul meaning. Her heart? Ah, that is a more delicate matter, and one that even time cannot disclose, for we who see the deed see not the motive. Let each who hears judge as he dares.

She unambushed her eyes presently, and looked up at him, smiling a little.

"Satisfied, Mr. Manager, with my Rake's Progress?" says she.

"More than satisfied—charmed, and your woman's wit does not need to ask. Why should I be here, who am not needed, wasting my precious minutes merely to listen to your voice of silver, and watch your eyes dim or brighten under Garrick's censure or praise? Madam, you know I can't tear myself away. They talk of weak women. It is men that are weak. If you look at me with that distracting softness, I swear I'll never trust myself in a room with you again!"

His manner was perplexing—half jest, half earnest. She looked up at him doubtfully, and, hesitating, was silent.

"Yes, Madam, and now you are silent and your silky lashes obscure the brilliance of your eyes and make them doubly dangerous. If you don't open them at once I'll—I'll—"

He advanced threatening. She sprang up and put the table between them, laughing nervously.

"Mr. Sheridan! Be grave, I entreat you, Sir. I need your assistance. You—you startle me!"

"What, another aspirant!—and Dick Sheridan to keep the cat from the cream that he—nay, Madam, don't look so frighted. 'Tis all over. I am the grave confidant again. The censor of morals—the Duenna!"

He uttered the name of his famous opera sardonically and pulled a chair towards hers.

"Well then—who is it now? O Lord! we have caught

a big fish this time with our unwilling lures! Are a woman's lures ever unwilling—even the chastest of them? God knows and he won't tell lest all the comedy of life be ended."

She had put in his hand a paper, contemptible in matter and manner, writ by the King's brother—the profligate Duke of Cumberland.

"H'm! 'Seen your unrivalled graces at Ranelagh.' Curse Ranelagh—why did I ever send you there! 'Hope for a favouring smile which is surely due to—' And so forth. Well, Madam, what is your royal will? Do we refuse with anger and contempt this time, or coolly and reservedly, with a rainy glimmer of hope for the future?"

"With loathing, if I had my royal will!" says she. "That man's face—his look, like Lord Lyttelton's, inspire me with horror. Write as stinging as you will, Mr. Sheridan. Put all your wits into that letter, for—no, I won't tell you the particulars, but had I been a man at the masquerade, or had a man for a husband, he would not have lived to write this insult."

She struck her hand lightly on the paper.

"Then this time we let ourselves go!" cried Sheridan, his eyes sparkling. "Throw prudence to the winds, royal duke though he be! What!—we'll teach him a lesson, and as for harming your future the man is so gross, so known a profligate that he can do nothing,—all decent folk shun him. Push me the pen—I'll write here and now."

He sat down to the table, while she watched him gravely, chin propped on two white hands, and eyes of sad foreboding. There were times when this young creature had the air of a Fate gazing into impenetrable sorrow. She had it now, as the wayward brilliant man before her, her undeclared lover, answered the other. Indeed anxieties were crowding upon her, and she could scarcely see a footstep of her way for them.

"To his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland,

"Sir, there lies before me your letter of the 4th inst., containing a proposal which demands a reply. If ever I dishonour my husband and disgrace myself it shall be for a lover who has the power to command affection tempered by respect, and not one whose horror-inspiring vices and person are rendered the more disgusting by the exalted rank that degrades and is degraded by them.

"Your obedient humble servant."

"Sign it. Sign it!" he cried, pushing it toward her. She read with flushed cheeks and signed with a dash. "My very sentiments!" she cried—and did not know that that letter carried the death-warrant to her hopes to be—hopes not yet formed, but quickening like the unborn child in a day yet to be faced.

He had not drawn his chair back. He captured her hand.

"Madam, yours to command, but should not the scrivener have his fee?"

"What is it?" she asked, collecting her resolution and avoiding the dangerous pleading eyes. His voice dropped.

"The same you gave me once some months since, Madam. A trifle and costless to you. To me a Kingdom!"

She let her hand rest where it was, and still with face averted, answered:

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you. Mr. Sheridan, I think I love you— No, no! Hear me out. My life has not been over sweet. You know that. And you came into my darkness— How shall I describe you to yourself—all light and beauty and gaiety. I thought of you as a visible joy. I was hungry and thirsty for happiness

when you went away. 'Twas like a rich man flourishing his riches in the face of one who wanted bread. Not cruelly— No, I never meant that, for indeed you brought hope and joy to me too that first day you would have me recite my Shakespeare. You are not like other men. Laughter attends you and a kind of brilliance coruscates about you that uplifts the heart. You have great gifts. I wrote verses about you. For a time I believed I was in love with you—no—again no! Wait! You *shall* wait or I will cease. (She paused.) And then you began to make love to me. You kissed me in that moment of mutual triumph! Did you build on that? I would have snatched up and kissed a dog then, had he lain at my feet,—so was my heart overcharged with delight. I strive to be candid. I am not in love with you. I don't comprehend this strangeness in myself but there it is. I don't love any man in that sense—I don't know what it means, and when you speak and look at me like that it repels me—because I love you most tenderly."

Her voice fluttered on the unexpected end of her speech. She looked at him through filming tears, her lips quivering. Her hand still lay in his. The swiftness of his mind comprehended her, but he would not speak, for reasons.

"You see"—she faltered—"I have such need of a friend. I have conceded and endured points I would yield to no other because I had a sick fear to lose you. My husband is less than nothing,—my brother far away. I have but you. And yet, even if it loses you to me, I must be candid, for you advance further daily. Can a man ever understand a woman's heart? Oh, try to do so! I love you, I look up to your wisdom and strength, I lean on you— But, oh, consider: Had I been in love with you, could I have shown you these shameful letters that befoul their object—could I have bid you aid me?

Would you have it come to this, that with my weakness I must repel the one comfort of my life lest it should turn hideous like this?"

She touched the Duke's letter with her disengaged hand. There was a long silence, and still he held the other.

Presently he bent his head and kissing it long and lingeringly released it. His keen face and brilliant eyes appeared unmoved as he answered her—coldly to all appearance.

"Madam, you have said enough. My rejected addresses shall trouble you no more. I apologize for the disagreeables you have felt them. If my pride's somewhat wounded—"

He paused, and she feared to look his way, terrified lest she had lost her one friend by a most unseasonable candour. A long sigh heaved her bosom. She sat patient, submissive, with bowed head, fearing thrusts and blows unanswerable.

Suddenly he caught her unresisting hand again, a swift change in face and voice like the falling of a soft rain, indescribably sweet and kind.

"My dear, forgive me. I comprehend. Indeed I do. 'Tis all past. Your love honours me. Your confidence—I'll wear it like a jewel. Never fear me again, but call upon me in all your needs and if I fail you may God fail me. I'll covet you no more. I'll protest your graces everywhere. I'll live your protestant to be! No more! Trust me!"

He raised her to her feet and they stood facing each other with clasped hands and a certain solemnity. The tears long brimming in her eyes fell down her cheeks and gathered again, but she looked at him through them with speechless gratitude. It was a strange scene with such a man and such a woman. Could it be that her instinct judged his infidelity to the object won, and chose

rather to risk leaving him this way than that? Or thus hoped to keep him? I cannot tell.

For himself— At the moment he meant what he said in every fibre of his being, and there is no man so dangerous as he who is all passions and emotions and believes each one a diamond, though in reality but a sunbeam dancing on a dewdrop to be dry ere noon. For there is no pretence in him. It is truth indeed, if only her rainbow reflection cast in running water.

"And you'll tell me your anxieties?" he questioned with deep-toned tenderness. "I have not offended beyond pardon?"

She looked up in his face, the night of her lashes starred with tears.

"You have not offended at all, my—my friend!"

They dropped on the last word and veiled her eyes. He took out his own handkerchief and dried them softly, meditating within his mind whether a kiss fraternal might not dry them more warmly. Perhaps it was fortunate that Mr. Garrick's voice, followed by Brereton's, was that moment heard at the door. The two within sprang apart: Sheridan leaning easily over the back of a chair, while Mrs. Robinson sat with a gentle languor in another, her head thrown back.

The newcomers made their salutations, Mr. Garrick with an eye whose keenness age could not dim on Sheridan. He knew as well as if he had been present that the air was disturbed and with no theatrical emotion, but for the moment let it pass.

"Well, Sir," says he, "I have brought Mr. Brereton true to time that Romeo and Juliet may go through their antics before Juliet's tutor!"

Mr. Brereton bowed obsequious.

"I entreat you, Sir, say Romeo's also. For if he were to set aside the knowledge he owes to the greatest of

actors, there would not be enough left to earn him a day's meals."

Mr. Garrick humphed and flopped into a chair with a disturbed brow. His heart was with Juliet's success, and he would not have her disturbed and vaporish for Mr. Sheridan's or any other man's pleasure. Mr. Robinson, too—with his debts and his women—Garrick had no priggish scruples about wishing the man shot or hanged, so only Juliet might have peace and fix her mind on Verona.

She could not at the moment. She began bravely with a tremble in her voice which stood well enough for passion, but presently relaxed into a nerveless quiet, pottering emptily through her speeches with a rueful self-pity like a fog over it all.

"Stop!" bawled Mr. Garrick, and Sheridan, lounging against the table with a side-glance at the drooping beauty, sprang bolt upright. She caught the back of her chair, red with anger, all the blood in her body burning to her face, and tried feeble defiance on the autocrat.

"Mr. Garrick—I owe you much, but how—how dare you? I am in trouble—domestic griefs, I—I—"

She stuttered and faltered under his cold anger. It daunted her horribly. His contemptuous silence took the wind out of her sails and they flagged helpless in a moment.

"Oh—oh—" she murmured and began to whimper. Mr. Garrick rose from his chair and looked about for his hat, then turned on her violently.

"If domestic griefs, Madam, are to render you forgetful of your duty to the public and to those who spare time and strength to instruct you, then I must needs say, Go back to your domesticities, for it's all you're fit for. Go back and darn stockings and suckle your brats, and mock no more at the greatest of the Arts. God forgive me that I thought you worthy to serve her. What, have I

not known one great actress play night after night with a cancer gnawing her bosom, and she the gayest of the gay, laughing and laughter-giving till she dropped. And another—with a devil of a husband to whom yours is as milk-curd—and she the life and stay of the piece? Have I not known the sluts of walkers-on with death and poverty in their garrets and they doing their duty the best they knew, and you to be languishing and mincing over your love affairs (here a glance like a sword-thrust at Sheridan) when you should be flaming and melting with Mr. Brereton only. God help you, for I'm done with you!"

He reached for his hat on the table—a terrible old man indeed. She was as white now as she had been red, and sick with terror. Not a word from Sheridan, and Brereton, aghast, pretended to look up his coming speeches, fluttering over the pages but with an eye on the three. There was not a moment to lose, time was flying, and Perdita, desperate, caught him by the vanishing robe. In other words, she flung herself between Mr. Garrick and the door.

"Oh, Sir, can you leave me thus? On the knees of my heart I entreat your pardon and I will kiss your feet if you won't hear me otherwise. You are right in every word you say. I am a selfish, weak creature indeed, but believe me I have it in me to learn, and your words are a wholesome medicine. Oh, stay—stay!" (For still he made for the door.) "Hear me only this once, and I'll be judged on the result. Mr. Sheridan, entreat for me! Oh—Mr. Garrick! For pity's sake!"

She looked up in his face, white and red by turns, one hand laid timidly on his arm. It did not melt him—but in the inmost of his heart he knew he had been harsh, and still more present was the thought that if the new Juliet failed, the audience would fail also, so high had expecta-

tion run. Therefore he permitted himself to thaw a little —a very little—and with distaste in every wrinkle.

"Madam, you have doubtless closer interests than the play and I am an old man who is still apt to put duty first. If, therefore—"

"Oh, Sir, you have taught me my lesson, and I thank and bless you for it, and shall for ever. Hear me now, and if I fail cast me out. Here, Mr. Brereton. I ask your pardon, too. You shall have no lifeless Juliet to spoil your fine playing."

She sprang into position and beckoned him eagerly. Garrick leaned against the door, detached and frosty, on the wing, as it were.

It has been said that women are greater actresses than men are actors when it comes to the best of both. If so, may it not be that nature calls on them daily to act a part, and strings them with responsive emotion that they may be fit to play it? Must they not always suit themselves to an audience whether by the fireside or in public, and are not the feelings of their audience the harp on which their own emotion plays? She saw in Garrick's frigidity that pleading would but anger him—to out-top his humour the only way. And accordingly she played as never yet. She was aiming desperately at Garrick and for the prize of her life, and handsomely indeed she did it. She glowed and burned and trembled, and slid into Brereton's arms, all melting, and sighed against his bosom, and wooed him with sweet eyes and lips, a maiden who knows not she wooes, and conquers in surrender.

Her audience was grimly silent still. He would fault-find fiercely if she gave but a crevice of an opening, but she was too eager, too cunning in her eagerness, and gradually his ice thawed. He left the door. He advanced and stood behind his chair. He slipped into it unconsciously. He listened with all his soul,—Sheridan watch-

ing with a keen glance to see him subjugated. He himself had never feared. He knew well she was not of the type of the greatest artist who dominates all the moods and uses them as slaves, but that emotion rightly played on would carry her to heights, he could swear, and thought, cynically enough, that he would stage a quarrel with Garrick or a love-scene with himself for her every night before she went on—if she had not learned her lesson by now.

The scene ended, she stood before the judge with dropped hands, relaxed into fear, with big Brereton smirking behind her. He knew he had done well. Mr. Garrick drew himself up in the chair and expressed enthusiasm.

"I have no fault to find, Madam. If you play it thus you will carry the audience with you. If otherwise, you will fail. It is plain that you can be a successful actress if you will, and the question whether you will is for your own decision. Let us now continue."

They went through all that could be done without the other players, Garrick supplying a word here and there. When all was done he commended Brereton, who departed hastily from so thunderous an atmosphere, and as the door closed on him Perdita knelt before the old man in his chair.

"My beloved and honoured Mr. Garrick, I kneel for your forgiveness, and bless you for your reproof which shall never be forgotten. I will repeat it to myself daily. But let your forgiveness sweeten it."

She did melt him then, through all the chill of age and vanity. He laid his hand on her head.

"I forgive you, my poor girl, and am not unmindful of your troubles. But let your art be your consolation. There is no better."

She thanked him humbly. When she was gone he turned on Sheridan.

"I saw when I came in how it was. You'll ruin that girl's future and your own pocket (which may touch you deeper) if you won't let her alone. I gave you a hint the first time I saw you with her, and I saw by the way you took it— No, Sir. Don't you contradict! Don't provoke me! Shan't I trust my own eyes? You rely on my liking for you, but—" and so on, and so on.

Sheridan masked and fenced instantly.

"Why, really, Mr. Garrick, I'm no Captain Irresistible, and haven't the vanity so to suppose myself, and as for the lady—I dare assure you she's no simpleton of a Lydia Languish, but very much a woman of the world, with offers—Good Ged—why, every man of fashion in the town is after her! She has no smiles to waste on a nonentity like me!"

Garrick switched his cane angrily.

"Nonsense, Sir. Don't you try to befool me, Dick! She's an honest woman yet, and if she remains so the better for her playing and your pocket. This is no stage trollop—though I won't by any means aver that chastity is a necessary part of the stage outfit, for you and I know better. But this one differs—she's a lady first and an actress after, and deepest down of all—a woman. And if she falls in love—you mark me! *That* for her acting!"

He cracked a scornful finger and thumb. Sheridan shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Some women," resumed the preacher, "may act the better for ruined honour and hopes. Not this one. She'll sink, not swim. And now good-bye to you, and take a hint which may save you regrets and money both."

He hobbled out on his stick and the door shut after him. Sheridan, left alone, threw himself into a chair, with both hands thrust in his pockets and stared moodily at the floor.

"A regular old Sir Anthony Absolute, growling and

storming— 'Don't provoke me!'" (He mimicked the old gentleman extremely well). "'You rely on the mildness of my temper—you do, you dog!' Well, but after all the old fool is right. He frightened the pretty creature into good behaviour—and 'tis certain I can afford no more losses."

He smiled a little at his thoughts. "Well—if he makes her a fiery Juliet and me an anchorite with one turn of his tongue, all I can say is 'tis Prospero's rod of power. Aho—oh."

He yawned and stretched his arms as though to deceive himself into indifference.

"The curtain falls!" he said at length and began putting his papers together. Indeed Richard Sheridan played as often to his own audience as to any other, and succeeded not seldom in moving his own emotions. But Perdita? Did he know her as well as Garrick did? Which was right? His judgment wavered. The real woman was hidden from him in charms like a cloud of petals. She was so sweet he could not come near enough to judge unbiased.

CHAPTER V

ST. CECILIA

SHERIDAN went home that evening to his foolishly extravagant home in Great Queen Street, desiring to secure himself from temptation by plunging into love once more with his wife. How madly he had been in love with her as the sweet Miss Linley of Bath, the exquisite singer, the delicious beauty the world knows, and also the history of the famous elopement, the duel, and all the sighs and passion of his youth. But that there were no birds in that last year's nest he knew very well. He loved his Elizabeth, but was no longer in love—a world of difference if you come to consider it. For we may love many—and be impassioned for but one. As his wife he would not have changed her for Perdita or any other, yet in truth she was now a part of the scenery of his life and by no means the leading lady.

The truth was he had more than a tinge of the seraglio taste for women, finding that marriage consumes the very love that brings it about. Why couldn't things last? Ah—if Providence had consulted him—the improvements he could have suggested! Familiarity breeding longing, not satiety, health and joy infectious instead of disease. Experience gathering zest, not old age, as its harvest, so that men when they could most taste life should enjoy with discretion instead of furious folly. Life was so damned, unspeakably difficult! He knew men who managed to keep tolerably straight by fixing one steadfast eye on the consequences of indulgence while the other pursued the lively temptation. Certainly the result was a moral obliquity of vision, but what then? He was not built that

way, and was it his fault or his misfortune? God knows! —he gave it up.

As he entered the house St. Cecilia's voice, divinely sweet, came down the stair from the drawing-room. She was singing Handel's "Waft her, angels!" and Sheridan knew very well who would be turning the leaves. But the music he could not resist, and he halted on the landing half way up to listen through the open door.

The voice lifted silverly with each pulse of the beating wings, rising, rising through blue air to highest heaven. "Waft her to the skies!" He could see the martyr dreaming the bliss to be, drowned in sleep in the arms of mighty seraphim, wings spread about her as the white groups mingled star-like with the stars. He had heard his wife sing it a hundred times, but that pure passionless emotion moistened his eyes as at first— If she could always sing and he listen in some remote crystalline heaven, he could lie at her feet and absorb her beauty and love her for ever and ever. If that could be!

"Angels!" on a silver sigh of pleading. And then triumphant—"There with you for ever reign"—the majesty of the great climbing notes loosed upon him, and so on to the last wings vanishing in the blue, and still he listened. She could always hold him with her singing. In that unimpassioned beauty even Perdita's eyes dimmed to faint stars shining through earth-mists, no longer desirable, and his own art and brilliance were mere posturings of a finical cleverness.

He heard a man's voice say something indistinguishable, and then her carolling laugh. It jarred him to earth after the divine exaltation of her song and he went up the stair half angry, half ashamed at his own emotion—the Sheridan she and all the world knew again. No one but himself was intimate with the Sheridan who had lingered on the stair, drawn upward by the song celestial. He did not

permit it, for that gentleman puzzled himself more than enough.

He walked into the drawing-room with an air which should inform the intruder that he wanted his wife to himself. She turned on the harpsichord seat and smiled, and my Lord Edward Fitzgerald did the same, and rose to meet him with disarming politeness. He carried at this time no trace of the melancholy which his connection with Irish politics was later to bring him and was a most attractive young man formed to catch and detain a woman's eye. As for his companion—the beauty of Elizabeth Sheridan lives in the portraiture of Gainsborough, a dark, delicate loveliness, the very super-distilled essence of refinement, and so spiritual in its fragility that it seemed too frail a vase to hold the power of her thrilling voice. A well-matched pair, yet surely it was unreasonable in Sheridan, who found so many attractions abroad, to require his lovely wife to pass all her hours in solitude at home.

He flung himself into his chair and she, sensitive to a breath, saw at once that there were clouds gathered and darted a swift look through long lashes at Lord Edward. In the vernacular it meant "Oh, forgive me, it's not my doing. But go!" Sweetly apologetic. He shot back: "Could I blame you for anything? Trust me," and spoke aloud:

"Glad to have a glimpse of you, Mr. Sheridan, before I go, though I wish you had come in an hour ago to share the exquisite delight of which you have deprived the unhappy public. I think Mrs. Sheridan's singing grows diviner daily."

Sheridan bowed as from frozen peaks in air.

"You have the opportunity of judging, my Lord," he said coolly, and so squired him to the door, and, returning, closed it.

"Does it not strike you as a trifle disagreeable, Elizabeth, that whenever I return home jaded and needing quiet, I find that unmannerly puppy seated here gazing into your eyes and flattering your singing? I am worried almost into the grave—"

She was on her knees in a moment beside him.

"What is it, my dear? Anything wrong at the playhouse? Why, I was only passing the time till you came. Tell me!"

Her tender arms went round him and she drew his head to her shoulder; but he sat up stiffly, repelling her.

"Fewer protestations and a little more attention to my wishes would please me better. I have told you before that I have no wish to see Lord Edward hanging over you everlastingly. Why, as I came up the stair I knew at once who was with you because you were singing as you never sing for me."

He knew it was a mean-spirited attack, yet could not control himself. His disappointment with Perdita, his anger with Garrick, the accumulating debts, all crowded upon him like premeditated injury and Elizabeth must be the scapegoat. But that she could not tell and certainly the first grievance was not one to win a wife's sympathy had she known it. She took a velvet-covered chair at hand and looked at the carpet, not at her husband.

"Money!" he said at last, with a kind of smouldering anger. "This house drains away money like a tide going out and leaving the rocks bare. Fool—fool that I was ever to take it. Why, the furniture alone!"—he gave an impatient thrust with his foot to the chair beside him. "That's the curse of marriage. A man likes to see his wife in decent surroundings, and a woman must have things as handsome about her as my Lady Betty Modish —and there you are! The man sweats for it!"

Dead silence from Elizabeth. She scorned to remind

him how she had clung to the little cottage at East Burnham where their married life began. It was he who had wearied, and very quickly, of their honeymoon life together. He who needed the glare of London, the give and take of wit and drink, and open housekeeping which drove the poor girl thin and pale with worry to see the costs mounting, Sheridan growling and yet insisting on the spendthrift continuance. This was the first evening he had come home alone for a week, and really she almost dreaded to see him alone, so inevitable was the reaction from his company gaiety. But not a word. To some women it is easier to bear injustice than to see love torn and tattered in a wrangle. She looked more like a beautiful St. Cecilia than ever, marble-pale and cold, with her fine profile turned to her husband, and her white dress flowing about her. That also he resented.

"Why don't you speak? If there's a thing angers a man 'tis to have his wife sitting sullen there when he's distracted with worries his marriage brought on him. A bachelor can pig it out. A married man must have this!"

He flung his hand abroad to the handsome room. She turned her large eyes on him then.

"Are you in pressing want of money?"

"Am I ever anything else? If Mrs. Robinson don't draw the public it's a debtor's prison for me to the end of my days, so far as I can see. Will your father do anything?"

She shivered almost visibly. At Sheridan's command she had so sought her father from time to time that he was more like to fly down the next street when he saw her than stay to welcome his daughter. No, she could certainly not do that. Her own poor fortune of £3,000 had long drifted out with the tide Sheridan spoke of, and though she had not reproached him it cost her more than

a pang or two to see that frail safeguard go down in the rush of riotous living.

He lifted his head and fixed her with his eyes, repeating:

"Will your father do anything? The taxes on this house are due in a fortnight and what with the salaries unpaid at the theatre and the costs, here it's life and death with me."

He was interrupted. The ice of her expression broke up into quivering smiles, and eyes the brighter for the moisture which gathered in them.

"Not my father, no—I couldn't ask him again. He has others to think of besides me. But, my dear, dear Chéri, *I* can help. *I've* got money of my own." She used her little French brevity for his name.

"You? What? How?" He stared at her incredulous and with a kind of jealous anger. His mind—neither wise nor wide where women were concerned—was apt to round them all up into a sordid enough bunch. Suppose Lord Edward had lent it! Suppose—

But she was on her knees beside him again, all sparkling with joy, a paper, warm from her bosom, in her hand.

"Chéri—Chéri, my dear, look here! I've an offer from the Pantheon—the Pantheon, no less!—to sing there for twelve nights. Twelve nights only! And guess what they offer me. Only guess!"

"What?"

"Twelve hundred guineas!" She fluted like a happy blackbird, her eyes as wild-bright with joy. He drew himself back and up.

" 'Tis the misfortune of having married a professional singer that lays a gentleman open to these insults! What!—My wife insulted by appearing at the Pantheon where every harlot can walk in and hear her for payment, and every loud fellow stare her out of countenance! No,

Madam. Do me the favor to remember you're no longer Miss Linley, but Mrs. Richard Brinsley Sheridan."

She tried the softest cajolery, knowing their need.

"My dear, is this reasonable? Think of the ease it would bring us. I never had a word or a look of disrespect when I sang, and yourself could bring me and fetch me every night and—"

"Yes—nothing easier! with Romeo and Juliet coming on at the playhouse and a hundred people wanting me a hundred ways at once. No—if you determine to disobey me, ask Lord Edward for his escort. No doubt it will please him excessively."

The injustice silenced her for a moment, but she tried once more, patiently and dispiritedly now.

"Think how we need it. The relief—and all for a few songs nightly which I might as well do there as here. I entreat you!"

"Allow me to be the judge; why, even that old bear—and bore—Johnson, when he heard the matter canvassed as to whether I should let you out to amuse the public had the good sense to say, 'He resolved wisely and nobly, to be sure. Would not a gentleman be disgraced by having his wife sing publicly for hire? No, Sir, there can be no doubt here.' That's his opinion and if the thing's so plain that a purblind old bear like that sees it, surely no more need be said."

He was the more angry because the money shone deliciously in his sight, and to feel it at once in and out of reach was more than he could bear. Why on earth had he taken so high ground at first that to get down now involved a disagreeable tumble to his pride?

It could not appear reasonable to the most famous English singer of her day, who had won her laurels as a girl of seventeen by singing before the old King in oratorio, that she should be debarred from what was not only

a pure delight but ease and comfort as well. The blood flushed into her pale cheek to hear him speak so contemptuously of her art. For the first time in their lives she retorted, however gently.

"It was not thought dishonourable by my father, nor did you think it when you courted me. If—"

But a sob caught her throat, and he went on grandly, and as if she had not spoken.

"I should have thought you would see the rights of the case—the malicious jests. That venom-tongued Horace Walpole wrote to one of his intimates (I saw the letter): 'Miss Linley's beauty is in the superlative degree. The King admires and ogles her as much as he dares to do in so holy a place as an oratorio.' Only a scurrilous jest, but am I to bear it, may I ask? I don't know how your father endured it?"

She sighed, conquered, then added gently:

"But I understand you have a high admiration for Mrs. Robinson, yet you don't mind her exposing herself to the public gaze on the stage—in all sort of parts and characters."

He looked a little conscious, but swaggered it off.

"She's not my wife, and if her circumstances compel her— But that reminds me, Elizabeth, it would please the lady if you gave her your countenance. She is every way deserving and driven on the stage by a bad husband, —only nineteen. She has said to me with tears in her eyes, 'To have the honour to know Mrs. Sheridan, who ranks with the angels for voice and beauty, would be an ease indeed to me in the anxieties of my new life.' "

If Perdita had not said it, she ought, and he supplied the deficiency. It would certainly be a shield to her if Mrs. Sheridan accorded her friendship,—a thing desirable in many ways. But he had a motive behind it all, and one not despicable. If she and his Elizabeth were friends it

would set his own friendship with her on a safer, wiser footing. He was not the man to deceive his wife with a friend she valued, and as he looked at the dear dark face before him the thought crossed his mind that none could know Elizabeth without loving her, and if the two were friends then indeed he would disturb neither Perdita's nor Garrick's mind any more. She looked at him with her eyes of transparent hazel, a smile lifting her sweet lip to show a glimpse of the pearls within.

"Why, of course. The poor girl! Bring her here, Chéri, and I'll do all I can for her. Besides, I must hear her sing. 'Tis possible I might help her there. We'll sing together."

On a sudden impulse he threw himself on his knees before her, and clasping her almost fiercely to him, laid his head upon her bosom. She sat, like a young mother with her child, stroking his hair softly.

"You are one of God's angels," he said. "I love you, I love you. Don't weary of loving me, my own, my Elizabeth."

CHAPTER VI

THE THREE GRACES

When Perdita the next day had Mrs. Sheridan's invitation, conveyed with an air impartial and cool, she knew at once that there was a subtle change in the man. What it covered, and why he had retreated into his alignments she could not tell, and was half piqued to see her desire so readily fulfilled. But a little reflection convinced her that come how it might, it should be welcome. She had just that affection for him which frightened herself lest it might deepen and strengthen. She knew he kept her anxious and perturbed, and that Garrick's warning had come not a day too soon. She knew she needed help from him daily which she could not ask from a lover. Therefore if, without offence on her side, she had opened his eyes to the difficulties of her case, she had done well and need regret nothing, and yet—so quickly, so unreasonably do the shadows flutter across a woman's sunshine that she did regret the calm carelessness with which he asked whether it would suit her to visit Mrs. Sheridan at two o'clock and bring her music with her. Hitherto his eyes had always spoken with his voice—a language that fluttered her into vague but delicious terrors. Now they were silent.

She accepted with eagerness, however, her brain assuring her heart it was every way better, and even when the chair was at her door, was still hovering at her looking-glass, alternating between two entirely desirable hats that she might look her best before the established beauty. She must not be outshone, and all the world knew that was a difficult resolution in presence of Mrs. Sheridan

and her charming sister, Mary Tickell, for their singing surpassed their beauty, could that be possible, and they were almost inseparable companions. Indeed the Linleys were like no other family in the world. "We are all geniuses," said little Tom Linley, playing his violin to ravishment in the nursery, and the best judges were inclined to agree with the precocious infant. Beautiful as gifted, the whole bouquet of them, girls and boys alike, frail as windflowers, quick, bright, with the grace of all dewy things soon to be exhaled in the heat of the day, they formed a close borough of their own, with their family intimacy and the little Linley language that served for use among themselves, and looked somewhat askance upon all outsiders so much less enchanting. The two fair sisters, in their famous portrait by Gainsborough, hang by their no less beautiful young brother by the same hand, in the gallery at Dulwich,—clear-featured and self-possessed he looks out from beneath the delicate Linley brows,—and so with all this family whom the greatest artists of the day sought as models for young grace and distinction. Perdita might well look to her laurels in such company, and delay her yawning chairmen for a busy hour with her looking-glass, while she added touch to touch.

Finally, a beautiful simplicity to all appearance, she was shut in and borne off to Great Queen Street.

As she stood on the steps, with the door opened, a voice so sweet came thrilling down the stair that she halted irresolute and all but flung back into the chair. Like all the world she had heard of Mrs. Sheridan's singing, but might hope her own not so poor a rival. Now, hearing with her own ears, she felt her courage ebb slowly out at those slim satin shoes adorning her little feet. For Perdita sang like a pretty woman with a wooing voice that all must smile to hear, but Elizabeth like an angel leaning from a cloud, raining pure music in ever-widening bliss.

There was indeed an unearthly sweetness in her notes, clear as light and as penetrating. Perdita, quick, responsive to every touch, knew the difference instantly.

"How could he listen to me, who could hear her daily?" —that was the thought, and she was not yet cynic enough to know that the last word gave the true reason that sways the mind of man.

She swam in at the door, the perfect lady of fashion to the eye, but trembling within like a shy child, uncertain of words or manner. The lady of the soft looks, as her father called Elizabeth, advanced to meet her. Two kind hands took her own, two clear hazel eyes looked frankly into hers.

"My dear Mrs. Robinson, how good in you to come. I have been hoping for this honour but knew that Garrick and my husband are working you so cruelly that your spare moments are golden. Sit down by me and tell me if they wear you out. But first let me present my sister, Mrs. Tickell, my other self, who gives me the joy of her company to-day. And make much of her, for she is the all-admired of the great Dr. Burney, the finest judge of music in England, and my sister has the happiness to please his taste. If *she* tells him of our new songstress he will be gracious to you indeed."

Mrs. Tickell swept the prettiest little curtsey. She was Elizabeth, but with the clear light and colour a little fainter both in face and character—let us say, a first study for that exquisite picture, fascinating indeed but to be perfected later in her sister. Yet she had her own special charm—a racy, laughter-loving young woman, with a gay sparkle that Elizabeth's more moving graces lacked. Her eyes danced like boys at a festival, as the saying is, and her little tongue could administer wasps' honey when it pleased her. She ran Perdita up and down with those quick eyes, probed, measured, weighed all in

a heart's beat, even estimated the probable worth in money to the theatre where all the Linley family had an interest, —and all this before she came to the recover in her curtsey. Her judgment, summarized, was this:

"Shy, sentimental. May be lackadaisical if Sherry don't hold her in awe. Probably a flirt of his already, however, and has the length of his foot to a hair. Lord, how pretty! A singing face, too. A draw for a season, at any rate."

Her lips said, in the silver Linley lilt:

"Delighted to meet you, Madam. We're all on the tiptoe of hope and expectation for our new Juliet. Garrick and Sheridan have composed a duet of your praises in which they show forth your praises in every society. Isn't it so, Elizabeth?"

"Indeed, yes, and well-deserved, we know. Be quiet, Mary. See, you make her blush."

"She shall blush more, Ma'am, before I'm done. Sheridan begins with a tenor solo, as thus:"

She began to warble most drolly, improvising and mimicking Sheridan to the life:

" 'And now the charming fair adva-ances,
All smiles and tea-ars to wi-in the heart,
See how she shoots her kill-i-ing gla-ances,
Each man a Ro-o-o-meo to her dart.'

"And then Garrick, basso profundo:

" 'Haste along, haste along, each nymph and swain,
And share the transports of my soul,
Susannah Cibber's come to life again,
With fourfold grace to animate the whole.' "

She finished with a rumbling scale of deep notes down to her little shoes, and curtseyed again to Perdita with

such a gay look beneath her long lashes as set the newcomer off into laughter and ease in a moment—'twas all so prettily and smartly done.

"Oh, Madam, you touch Mr. Garrick off to the life," says she. "If only he would leave making comparison of me with that great woman! Sure, those who remember her will pelt me off the stage."

Elizabeth put up her finger at her sister.

"Be you quiet, Ma'am. You comfort her up instead of teasing! Can't you see she's half dead with fright at the thought of facing the great big public?"

"So affrighted, Madam, that it appears to me I shall totter on the stage with a voice as failing as my steps and die before their eyes of sheer terror. I can't put my alarms into any words which will convey how they disable me."

"Don't you be afraid!" says Mrs. Tickell mischievously. "I have most reviving news for you. Signor Wisky-Wosky something, the envoy from I don't know where, saw you walking in the Park o' Tuesday and has told Sheridan and the public that you resemble to the life a portrait of Juliet painted by the celebrated Ferolo Whiskerandos, and therefore he and the members of his Embassy shall attend the theatre and pelt you with superlatives and roses and challenge any lady or gentleman who fails to do the same."

Perdita looked still more alarmed, and Elizabeth Sheridan said good-humouredly:

"Your own consciousness of talent will support you better than all the champions in the world."

"Talent, Madam? I scarce believe I possess any. Mr. Garrick and your husband are good enough to protest that I do, but for myself I think I'm but a poor frightened woman compelled to earn her living in a way perhaps the last I should undertake."

Mrs. Tickell's bright eyes considered her again. A lovely woman, receptive enough to be tutored, capable of high flights in and for a moment if her nerves were set a-going with a sudden stimulus that set her temperament agog, but no Muse incarnate whether of tragedy or comedy. Let a great actress,—and she had seen many,—enter a room and she dominates it, either by grandeur or humour or the deep vibration of latent power. But this lovely creature was frightened, self-distrustful. Her beauty was the best thing about her, and there Mary Tickell thought Elizabeth surpassed her.

"But men," she reflected shrewdly, "will be at her feet. They'll never even try to resist those large eyes so full of pleading and sensibility, which seem to say: 'Be good to me, I implore you. Love me and I'll be good to you.' On the whole, therefore, I think Sherry has made a catch,—if she don't make a fool of herself when she walks on." A lady of quick and unchangeable opinions!

Refreshments were served in the style Sheridan insisted upon, little as he could afford the display, and then Mrs. Sheridan begged for a song, unrolling the music which had dropped from Perdita's immense and fashionable lace muff. She looked at her hostess beseechingly—had they but been alone!—but Mrs. Tickell's sparkling eyes were question-marks.

"Madam, I entreat you to sing first and then I shall be so possessed with music that I shall not hear my own failure," said Perdita, putting up her hands in prayer.

It was so evident she meant it that Elizabeth took her seat at once and sang a famous Italian bird-song by the little-known composer, Marcello. It was an *aubade*, and the waking lark and thrush played their parts. Indeed, it might have been written for her or for two larks vibrating in the blue, so did her voice echo and answer itself with lovely wordless trills and shakes and cascading rivu-

lets of sound thrillingly sweet. Hyperbole itself cannot outsoar the singing of Elizabeth Sheridan. Other women have had voices as sweet, others have been as beautiful, but there is no record of one in whom beauty was music, music beauty, and both blended with a heavenly loveliness as in her.

"Her countenance while singing was like nothing earthly," says one. "She is more than human," cries another. The great Dr. Burney tries to write calmly of her in his "History of Music," and cannot. "The tones of her voice and expression are as enchantive as her company and conversation. With a mellifluous voice, a perfect shake and intonation, she possessed the double power of delighting an audience equally in pathetic strains or in songs of brilliant execution, which is allowed to very few singers." To very few also is it allowed to express their own soul, and that as lovely as the ethereal face which seemed music itself embodied.

Her sister, who adored her, also listened entranced.

"She improves daily," she thought. "And yet, how pale and slight! I know that man tries her to the limit of endurance. This player-woman now—should she be forced to receive women whose reputation— Well, only Sherry to answer for it,—and some long queer story about her husband?"

Meanwhile the player-woman, with clasped hands, was entreating for another song, with eyes also that pleaded more eloquently than her words. Mrs. Sheridan sang again, and with her sister, the voices blending in a harmony which should have been immortal, for Mary was a singer but little below her sister,—and then gently insisted upon Perdita's obliging her.

"And yet, not if it really pains you!" she said, adding, "Let me play your accompaniment. You won't be frightened of Mary and me."

Perdita sang and, resting on that sweet kindness, gathered courage and voice as she went on. It was so impossible to think of rivalry with the two singers that enforced humility helped her, and she sang with so much charm that when she turned blushing away, Elizabeth caught her hand and spoke with such true warmth of her pleasure that the pupil's eyes brimmed with quick tears.

Mrs. Tickell caught her by both hands.

"You'll do, Ma'am. You'll do! I promise not to torment you any more. We'll all be tumfy together, and you shall learn the little Linley language and be one of us, if so be you're a good girl and play pretty, and I'll hunt out a trio for the three of us to sing—see if I don't!"

So between them they cheered the poor trembling thing until she had done herself full justice in a second song and Mrs. Tickell must run off to her man. She threw her arms about her sister with her queer "Well, good-bye, and God thee bless!" and looking up with a sparkle at the taller Perdita, swept her cheek with a flying kiss.

"Good-bye, Ma'am, till I see you again. Don't you have any fear of the public. I've faced it often enough to tell you it's a great big goose, and if you say 'Boh!' to it 'twill run cackling away!"

"And hissing!" says Perdita. "You couldn't have chosen a more striking illustration, Madam!"

"Well, now—if it hisses, you go *so*—" says Mrs. Tickell, touching her thumb to her nose and spreading out her fingers, "and you drop a curtsey, *so*" (she dropped the archest ever seen), "and make big eyes at them, *so*" (she raised a pair of eyes brimmed with mischief, as if to the gallery), "and you'll see what happens. Lovers, Ma'am, lovers, in a trice!"

She broke off short, and shot to the door, there kissed her hand and pattered off down the stair, humming the burden of her song as she ran.

"How lovely!" said Perdita impulsively,—"and as gay as a spring breeze. Have you any more amazing sisters, Madam? I have heard of your brothers."

Elizabeth dimpled.

"Yes—Maria and Jane. Indeed, you would love Maria's voice. You shall hear it. She is scarcely fourteen but sang from the cradle almost. But my Mary is my heart's own sister—the pick of the basket for me. She and I are true inseparables,—and under all her gaiety as wise as any owl. But come, my dear Madam, let us talk of yourself. My husband tells me you have known much trouble, though so young. And you have two babies!"

Perdita, left alone with Sheridan's wife, unfolded like a rose in that gentle sunshine. She found herself revealing the story of her troubles—the death of one baby, her husband's vagaries, her hopes and fears.

"He was in prison for debt, and I followed him there. Indeed, indeed, dear Mrs. Sheridan, I have tried to do my duty to him—almost beyond my strength," and so forth, the other's face paling as she thought how like her own fate might be to this poor girl's if Chéri persisted in the mad course of expense which tortured her with such fears. She sat holding Perdita's hand while the poor thing poured out her tale—all but the amorous persecutions she must endure. These she could not speak of. How could she degrade herself in those pure eyes or bring the soil of the world so near this silver-voiced angel? At the end she paused, hesitating, then added with courage:

"But I wish, Madam, that I could at all express to you my deep gratitude to Mr. Sheridan for all his kindness. It has been as generous as unexpected,—and may I say that not the least of it do I count the sitting here to-day in your companionship. I thank you both from my heart!"

She felt and expressed it genuinely. Now she knew

Elizabeth Sheridan her mind was made up. Not were he twenty times as attractive, twenty times as necessary to her, should there be a look or a word between them that would dim the wife's eyes if seen. Some women have the gift to draw out the best in other women, to awaken a thousand sleeping generosities and delicacies of which their possessors are unconscious, and exalt them into virtues, and never a woman more than this Elizabeth. Whatever Sheridan's resolution might be, Perdita's was taken, when she rose to go, clasping the kind hand extended to her:

"I wish—I wish I could tell you, Madam, what this afternoon has meant to me. I have had a lesson in singing which reveals beauties I never thought possible. But that is the least,—I don't disguise from myself that mine is a difficult profession in which to be—to be—good" (she said it like a child, her lip quivering), "but to be with you makes goodness seem as natural as the flowers you wear."

She lifted the hand she held and would have kissed it, but Elizabeth, taking hers, kissed her on the cheek.

"Come again and often, my dear Madam," said she. "I don't doubt that your soul is transparent as your face, which reveals all your kindly thoughts. And we will sing together and this will give you confidence for the public. Indeed, these public professions are trying to a woman's delicacy, but honest work sweetens all about it, and when 'tis one of the great arts such as yours or mine—"

She paused with eloquent eyes, and Perdita, uplifted but sighing inwardly, bade her good-bye with heartfelt thanks. The first silken thread of friendship was spun between them.

She said as much to Sheridan next day when they met at the theatre and he asked of the meeting. He had not yet seen his wife, having been out all night at a wine and card party at the home of a boon companion. He only

knew how much it had cost him in money, but his eyes, brilliant in the jaded setting of purple beneath them, told another and heavier cost. Perdita looked at him gravely.

"I think your wife is an angel, Mr. Sheridan. Not because she sings like one, though all the world knows that,—I never heard or dreamed such melody,—but that's not my meaning. Nor yet her sweet beauty. But something exceedingly moving and touching which surrounds her. Had I anything worse than frivolities on my conscience I would not seek her company, for all her gentleness."

He answered, staring at the ground.

"I know well what you mean. You say very true. And I read something else in your voice. You marvel I'm not a better man than I am. So do I. Yet marriage is a strange business—you should know that yourself. At the best the world very soon comes between. At the worst—"

He broke off, cast aside his seriousness, and was laughing in a moment.

"So you liked the singing? Such a mistress of flat and sharp, squallante, rumblante and quiverante! Didn't I write that passage while she was chirruping like a choir of nightingales over my head upstairs? Well, did you give her back crochet for crochet, Madam?"

"I sang for her—with great misgivings, I own. She—"

He broke in again with the same excited gaiety.

"Pretty musical little purlings, rose and nightingale. And she had a companion to applaud, I dare swear. It wasn't only herself to tell you how charming sweet you warbled. You had other applauses as well?"

"Indeed, both were very kind, Sir," says Perdita, surprised.

"I expected as much. He should be a connoisseur by this time. You may please yourself on his approval."

"He, Sir? Mrs. Tickell was Mrs. Sheridan's companion, and if I had not been so occupied with Mrs. Sheridan's beauty and goodness, I doubt if I could have plucked up courage to sing before her. She had an eye which, while it is full of laughter, takes the sharpest side-glances ever I saw! I could be afraid of her! Not of your wife."

He was mending a pen now, and answered with seeming indifference.

"Oh, it was she, was it? Well, you're in luck if she carries a good report to her admirer, Dr. Burney. He's a great grandee where music's concerned, and can give you a shoulder up the ladder of fame as well as any man."

"Oh, I see. You thought 'twas he was there? No, Mrs. Tickell. She left early."

Sheridan did not contradict her.

When he went home next he had the other side of the story from his wife.

"I think her a charming young woman, her candour and modesty most attractive. None of the airs of the successful beauty—"

"We shall see those in due course when she *is* successful. At present the lady is but on probation, and knows it. But what of her singing? There I shall get the truth from you. On anything else you are too superior to be truthful."

There was the hint of a sneer in his voice. How it was that she provoked him so often into contradiction he could not tell, but there were times when he would treat her as he dared no other in the world. She coloured faintly and went on.

"Her singing I think full of promise. Her voice sweet and strong. She will have all the graces that attract the public, and must please naturally. She wants constant

practice and a few suggestions, so I asked her to come here and sing when she pleases, and whereas I feared she would be hurt, she took it most kindly."

"And why not? Lessons free gratis for nothing from the woman who knows most about singing in London? She's not such a fool as to refuse."

CHAPTER VII

THE ORDEAL

The great, the awful day drew near for Perdita when she was to make her entry on the stage, and her terrors were beyond all words. In vain Garrick alternately threatened and commended her, not knowing whether wormwood or honey would best medicine her fears. Sheridan grew seriously alarmed. There was no flirtation in the air now. He took Garrick's advice in good earnest, and his manner with her though kind was always businesslike. But none the less he could not distract his attention from her. If she had been a greater actress she would have won him less, but as it was, the charm of her beauty, of her self-distrust, her tenderness to reproof, her quick agitated sensibility, made her irresistible. He could not look at her even in her most distant moments without imagining her quivering in his arms, all melting smiles and tears and tender shame, delight set against regret like a rainbow on a cloud.

And then how she was courted! It made her value no less in his eyes, be sure.

The utmost she could earn at the theatre, why, what a pittance was it compared with the princely offers which poured upon her daily. She brought them all to him like a sister to a brother, only beseeching of him never to name them to Mrs. Sheridan lest it be supposed that any lightness in herself might have encouraged them. He assured her gravely that she could rely upon him, knowing very well that his wife was the last in the world to whom he would break these confidences. He knew very

well also he was the only man in the world who possessed them. Certainly Mr. Robinson was not in the way of them.

A strange position for a man, half a lover, if no more, to repel the pretenders with all his skill, for she would always say:

"Write me an answer, Mr. Sheridan. He deserves a stroke of your wit!" and then he would sit down and despatch a refusal so neat, so pointed, that Mrs. Robinson acquired not only the reputation of a Diana but of a somewhat biting little Muse as well, a nymph whose softening eyes and amorous lips invited the invitation, and then—pouf!—the sun was clouded and there came a fall of unexpected and stinging hail.

For the worst was that in speech and manner she could never achieve the cool and gentle dignity she admired as an ideal. Like most ideals it sat on a cloud and mocked her, and be the gentleman who he might she could not control her smiles or those fascinating eye-beams even if she would. It is so much easier to smile than to sit glum, to charm than to repel; surely the mere attempt is to wrong such a face, such a shape! And after all, Sheridan was there for Cerberus, and to write her refusals.

But it might be supposed that all these adventures were very likely to fill Drury Lane to overflowing on the first night of her appearance. The pretenders alone might almost have answered for that, and rumours were coursing about (not unaided by Sheridan, who strongly held that sweet are the uses of advertisement) of more than one duel fought over the possession of a box for the occasion. The Duke of Cumberland, brother to the King, would represent Royalty, accompanied by his impudently beautiful Duchess. The world knows how far he married beneath him, a lady of the house of Luttrell by birth, the widow Horton by marriage.

But indeed it was certain the theatre would be crowded with all the rank and fashion who had beheld the lovely Mrs. Robinson in private life and now died with curiosity to see what place she would take on the boards trodden by such famous feet. Curiosity, jealousy, thwarted desire, budding hopes—how many passions agitated that audience—all gold and satin and embroideries and softly waving plumes to the eye, up to where the gods sat in their grimy heaven, eager more for the play than the player.

She came into the green room, pale as ivory, under her rouge, feeling, as she told Sheridan, like Mary Stewart robing for execution, when her dressers put upon her the magnificently simple dress of pale pink satin judged suitable to the Verona beauty, with strings of pearls woven in the dark hair which framed her face so exquisitely. On the score of beauty Verona had no call to complain of her representative,—Juliet herself could have no sweeter eyes and lips to meet her lover, and Perdita displayed all a very young girl's grace in her wistful slenderness and the pleading grace of her movements.

Sheridan became aware that he had never realized how beautiful she truly was. Her nineteen years had taught her so little that in spite of all the pursuit she did not as yet understand her power. Elizabeth was in the right—She had no airs. She could only woo and entreat man, woman, the public, for compassion on her efforts to please. Had they been alone he would have reassured her— How?

She came up to him, her eyes distended with fear, hands half stretched before her.

"Mr. Sheridan, I can't—I can never do it. I know myself. I shall faint on the stage. Is the understudy here?" She was gasping the words. He took his cue instantly and was bright and cold as ice.

"Naturally she's here. But, my dear Mrs. Robinson, let me felicitate you on the beauty of your appearance. That dress will set all the town talking. Impossible that you designed it yourself?"

Perdita revived faintly.

"I did—indeed I did. I found a wood-cut of some Venetian lady, square-cut and the lace falling back in something of a ruff. But, oh, Mr. Sheridan, what matter clothes to one who will be rightly hissed off the stage? For God's sake let me hide my disgrace in peace, and send on the understudy."

She meant it at the moment, and was in an extremity of terror. Had any other man than Sheridan been there she might truly have thrown up the sponge before the combat, and the world never heard her story. But he knew many women, and this distressed creature not least, to the very marrow. He gave her a chair and sent for a glass of wine.

"What," he said, sadly and reproachfully, when she had sipped it, "you to whom I have opened my anxieties, fail me? Oh, never! I know you better. You know that my all depends on your success, and sure I can count on you. And playing to a house full of lovers, to whom every glance, every movement, every broken word is more precious than diamonds! And with that coarse boor, Cumberland, present to see you outsoar him and gain by your own genius the splendours he made a bait for you! Were I a woman I could imagine no greater triumph of contempt than to show him your strength and leave him in the mire."

She hung on his words with quivering lips, listening intently. He saw he made his mark and continued.

"It was but this afternoon Garrick said to me: 'She has genius and knows it not. Mark my words, brought in contact with the public it will flash out of her like

lightning. My career is near over, but I mistake much if this is not the most sparkling diamond I have ever offered to the town!"

The diamond flashed in her quick look of joy.

"He did, indeed," replied Sheridan, perjuring himself with perfect composure. "And if you could fail that great man—so near his end—for you have but to look at him to see the sands are running out—all I can say is— But failure? No, you do not know the word, much less the black bitter thing. To slink away into the darkness conquered and despised!"

Her face glowed responsive, and as Garrick came up, hobbling on his stick, she ran and took his hand.

"Mr. Garrick, do you like how I look? Am I your Juliet?"

He looked her up and down smiling a little through his wrinkles.

"You're Shakespeare's Juliet, which is more to the point. If you speak as you look, your tutor will be well satisfied."

"You shall! You shall!" said she eagerly. "Your dear words, which Mr. Sheridan has told me, have nerved me better than wine—of which I will drink another glass, if you please. Oh, what should I have done without you!"

She drank the wine eagerly, and hurried off to Brereton —a handsome figure of a Romeo in his white satin and gold.

Garrick turned to Sheridan.

"What have I said?" he questioned dryly.

"All that was necessary, Sir. I took care of that!" Sheridan's grin was answer enough, and Garrick hobbled off to his place laughing a little. Women, women!

How much he had seen of them in his long years—how alike they were, all—even the greatest. Singular creatures! Were they worth Shakespeare's genius? Was not

the stage better served when lovely boys played Juliet and Rosalind? They were at least more dependable.

Her courage ebbed again when the terrible moment confronted her. Pale and tottering, she held desperately on to her courage, and emerged, leaning on the Nurse's arm, her heart throbbing as if it would stifle her, yet still preserving a kind of composure, for if she let it slip by so much as a hair's breadth she knew ruin awaited her.

There was a thunder of applause as the gracious figure came into sight, slight and shrinking. It all but unnerved her. Happily Sheridan was at the wing and she caught his quiet confident smile, and steadied her fears upon it.

The first scene had few sentences and gave her time for recollection and to accustom herself to the white tiers of faces, and the eyes—eyes which her excited fancy saw glittering in every direction like stars in midnight in the darkened auditorium. She caught the sound of her own voice like a stranger's, faint and drowning in a tense and awful silence.

Fortunate indeed was it that Garrick had placed himself where she must see him, for the master's calm instantly caught and subjugated the pupil. Fail before him—he who had declared her the most brilliant of all his jewels—he who had seen all the genius of the last fifty years and more! Blast his hopes after the care his failing strength had expended upon her? Never! And looking straight at him she regained her courage, and her fresh young voice rang out clear as crystal, and Sheridan in his hiding place relaxed with a "Thank God!" and stood there quaking no more.

But the world knows her triumph. Indeed she had but to be herself to be Juliet. The part was well chosen. Perhaps it was more a triumph of personality than of art—all said and done. But it sufficed.

The victory was won. The applause shook the house. With each scene she gained power, with each she tasted the most instant of human gratifications that can be founded on any worldly object.

They would scarcely permit her to leave the stage. Each man repulsed tried to make interest for himself in the fury of his applause. They threw flowers at her feet —they shouted for Juliet each time she tried to glide away. The other actors were forgotten, and all centred on the slim white figure appealing, as it were, to be released from the burden of adoration, half weeping, half laughing—an April beauty of shower and sunshine.

In the green room it was the same. Men of fashion had crowded in. They surrounded her there also, and it was with the utmost difficulty Garrick could approach and get her into a corner. She thought of no other when she saw his face, and brushed them aside relentless.

"My dear, dear sir—were you satisfied?" was all she could say, almost on a sob. "It was to you I played. I should have been wrecked but for your kind but awful look as I crept on the stage. If I have failed in *your* eyes the applause means nothing to me!"

He was moved beyond his wont.

"You have done wonders, my child! I say deliberately, looking back on a lifetime, that in appearance as well as in playing I recall not your equal as Juliet. You satisfied eye and brain alike!"

"And heart?" she questioned, eager for more and more of that delicious flattery.

"And heart," he added. "Now go home and sleep, and be thankful that the ordeal is past and the way open before you. Yet think not (here again he became awful) that all is done. Much is yet to learn. Juliet is one thing—Rosalind, Statira— Ah, in art there are many

worlds to conquer. Keep therefore the docility of a pupil!"

She promised, and turned eagerly to Sheridan, who had been passing from group to group, inspiring and collecting their delight.

"And you?" said eloquent eyes and silent tongue. "You?"

He was not the man to resist that appeal. He took Garrick's place, and hemmed her into the corner, his own back to the crowd. His eyes plundered her beauty—all flushed and dewy with pride and joy. She saw it, and a deeper rose burnt on her bright cheek.

"You want to know what I feel? Then you shall know!" he said, fixing her with that strange brilliant glance which magnetized so many men and women and drew them where he would. "You were Juliet and therefore divine, for Shakespeare made the immortal maid for man's wooing and victory in making that unfolded rose,—but you were more, you were a woman to drive men mad with your beauty, to make them forget every obligation of life if only they might possess you for one hour and if—"

A clear and peculiarly refined voice interrupted his rhetoric.

"Will you do me the favour, Mr. Sheridan, to present me to the lady who rules all hearts?"

It was a handsome young man, languid and indolent in manner, richly dressed in damask velvet with gold embroideries.

Sheridan, by the easiest transition, finished his sentence for the newcomer to hear.

"And certainly to-night is destined to bring good fortune both to Juliet and to me. (Then turning brusquely round.) I entreat your pardon, Sir. Did you speak?"

"Only to introduce myself to the celebrated Mr. Sheridan, and ask what all the world is asking, Sir: the favour of an introduction to the queen of hearts. I am Lord Malden."

His bow was perfection,—and Juliet still in her deathdress of white, with the long white veil falling like a cloud about her, blushed and bloomed at the compliment, opening two large dark eyes upon him with beseeching gratitude. O radiant world of joy and triumph, peopled by such kindly sympathetic souls thronging to participate in her happiness! They cared, they were glad. Then indeed it was but natural and just that she should rain all her charms upon them, and speak to every man, every woman, as though they were the friends of her heart.

Lord Malden was dazzled. It was not only Perdita's loveliness that winged her darts, but she had in perfection the manner which seems to conceal a deep unconfessed interest in the happy man distinguished at the moment. It was perfectly natural to her, but whether she could have controlled it is known only to herself. It was, at the best, dangerous.

Little was said on that occasion and little did she imagine the part he was to play in the drama of her future life and alas! in Sheridan's also. He stood chatting easily for a few minutes, his hat under his arm, and then gave way gracefully to the rush of another horde of admirers, and withdrew to talk with Sheridan who listened with one eye on Perdita.

"Excuse me, my Lord," he said presently. "Mrs. Robinson is worn out with fatigue and excitement. We must not risk her health. She is all sensibility and needs care and rest. I will go and escort her to her chair and then return."

Lord Malden bowed but followed, and the two of them took her to the door, she hanging on Sheridan's arm, and

shut her in safely. She leaned out however, smiling and waving, and whether the last glance was for Sheridan or Lord Malden, who could tell? The only legitimate way was to divide it between them openly and each appropriate it privately.

Lord Malden was as searching as he dared in his questions as to her history, Sheridan with the most attractive candour baffling him whenever he thought proper.

"She must be much pursued!" his Lordship said reflectively, eyeing the diamond buckle on his shoe, but with the twinkle of an eyelash toward his companion. Sheridan agreed gravely in a single word, no more.

"I hear of her wherever I go as a delicious beauty. At White's, Brooks's—everywhere—the men discuss her. Is she—is she strait-laced?—a pretty Puritan, Sir?"

When Sheridan drew himself up he was a very haughty gentleman indeed, and of a distinction which was a match for any grade of the Peerage. He did this now, and with a pride outtopping my Lord Malden's languid elegance.

"I think, my Lord, they must have forgot at White's that Mrs. Robinson is a lady by birth and though forced to support herself by appearing in public, as virtuous as their own wives and daughters. Her husband was a schoolfellow of my own at Harrow. Perhaps your Lordship will remind them of the circumstance when next they discuss her."

My Lord bowed gravely, but with a twinkle in his blue eye. It was difficult to take either an actress or Sheridan's heroics seriously. He made his adieux with congratulations on the success of the evening, and went off to Brooks's brimming with jests on the nunnery at Drury Lane of which Dick Sheridan proposed to be the Abbot.

And next day the newsprints teemed with flattering accounts of the new actress, and Perdita, who had not closed an eye all night for tossing excitement, had the

pleasure of finding herself on every tongue of taste, rank, or fashion in London. Mr. Robinson, away for two days at some haunt of dissipation, returned so stupefied with drink that he could not be made to comprehend the triumph, and so heavily in debt from a few hours of card-playing that a large part of her (supposed) first week's salary must go to pay it off. It was fortunate indeed that the real sum was a secret between the actress and her young manager. She ran off to him almost in tears as early as she dared to entreat that the truth might never escape.

She was in her simplest dress, a light brown lustring with close cuffs, and plain round cape with white chip hat, —her face as rueful as it had been glad the night before— a charming downcast Perdita. He was extremely busy, but never too hurried to listen to her griefs, and re-assured her kindly.

"We will keep our secret, and if you please you may abuse me in public for a niggard." (She shook her head, smiling.) "And since you are here, there is one word I wish to say. I think we were all a little drunk with success last night, Juliet. I know it went to my brain like strong drink—of which also I was not entirely innocent. And so far as I can recollect myself I believe I was in the midst of some remarks best forgot for your sake and mine, when Lord Malden interrupted us, for which I now thank him, though not at the moment. Shall we return a page or two in our history to the day when you so movingly entreated my friendship and disclaimed all more ardent attachments? I am no Puritan, God knows, yet think for both our sakes and—and others'—discretion may here be the better part of valour. Has this your approval?"

She eagerly assured him it had.

"Oh, Mr. Sheridan, your friendship is my highest aim.

What I said that day I earnestly repeat. Be my friend, I beseech you, and no more."

He looked at her a little quizzically.

"Shall we seal the bargain? No—no, I meant not so. This way only!"

He lifted her hand, and kissed it lightly, quickly dropped it, bowed her to the door, merely adding, "Let us make a forgetting night of it," and resumed his writing.

An Irishman through and through, a wayward wind blowing sunshine one hour and sleet the next. A creature of moods like a woman's, heaven-high with joy and hope one day, hell-deep in melancholy later. A man of perhaps the most rounded and perfect ability, short of genius by but a hair's breadth, that the British Isles carry in their record, and lastly a man, from some deep unseen flaw in him, certain to soar as near the sun as an eagle and, straining his wings in the flight, fall very lamentably to earth. But in his gay twenties the glitter and grief were hid alike in the future.

CHAPTER VIII

SWEETEST EYES WERE EVER SEEN

It is needless for the elucidation of Perdita's history to describe all her triumphs. She brought a breath of refinement to the stage—she and her lovely rival, Elizabeth Farren, afterwards Countess of Derby, whose elegance of distinction matched Perdita's. But to Perdita's confidence in her own good taste it was left to attack the habit of dressing every part absurdly in the fashion of the day. Was it a passion for historical exactitude, or shall we allow that she knew the trailing draperies dear to the artist became her better than the vast embellishments of the hoop? Who shall say? But when Mrs. Robinson announced that she proposed to raise the art of the stage by more than her most lovely presence, no voice was raised in revolt, and Sheridan, sensible of the interest it would arouse, watched with delighted interest. He sent it flying through the town that Mrs. Robinson would play the part of Statira in "Alexander the Great" in "an Oriental habit," and all the gathering of men and women in London were in the highest agitation to know what she would be at. The house all but overflowed at the doors, and when Statira came on in a robe of the true Persian taste in white and heavenly blue, no hoop or powder, her little feet twinkling shyly in and out in sandals richly ornamented and bound on with ribbons, a roar of applause went up which nearly lifted the roof at this singular and beautiful novelty and left the poor Roxana in her hoop a sorry and neglected figure, almost fainting with mortification. Here again was the per-

sonal triumph, and it is indeed very difficult all through to disentangle that element from Perdita's success as a player.

So, rising from triumph to triumph, her first season went by. After anxious conferences with Garrick, Sheridan decided that tragedy as well as comedy lay in her compass.

("And, indeed!" says Perdita with handkerchief at her eyes, "who has known tragedy if not I!") And here, too, she met with success. Yet those who were the graver judges, and less liable to the dazzlements of beauty preferred her in such parts as the gay and ardent Sir Harry Revel in "The Miniature Picture." Mr. Garrick was among them. For whatever might be said of Perdita's tragic genius her limbs were undeniable. *There* the most critical judgment could find no lapse from perfection, and clad in satin breeches and long silk stockings the gallant young spark took the town's admiration and ardour and carried it off on her light froth of gaiety, until of all amusements the most fashionable was to be (if a man) an acquaintance of the lovely Sir Harry: if a woman, the nearest imitator of her last fashion—barring always the breeches, which a lack of courage, not of envy, alone forbade the London belles to assume.

She was the gayer perhaps, and with an added touch of recklessness because her domestic affairs grew more and more involved. Her baby girl, an engaging little creature of two years, in the care of her good mother, was her only comfort there, for her husband did not now trouble to hide his infidelities, and two ladies beside himself lived on what he could take or anticipate of Perdita's salary. As it was all legally his her only hope was in the private arrangement she had made with Sheridan, and as it was she was so heavily in debt on her husband's account that hungry creditors absorbed even her Benefits.

Often her spirits would have flagged hopelessly but for Sheridan's gay good humour. To him she took all her troubles, and pity for the girl's utter need—not yet twenty and struggling with such adverse fate, enabled him to keep at the level of cheerful sympathy which best keyed her up to the work he expected of her. A deviation in the direction either of coolness or of sympathy a shade too warm would have ruined all, and whatever his secret thoughts were he kept them to himself. His theatrical affairs were never more flourishing, for in the plays he presented that season he had not only Perdita's powerful aid but three others only less charming, the famous Miss Farren, Miss Walpole, and the future Mrs. John Kemble, and not one of his beauties was twenty years old. Well might the pleasantries concerning the Abbot of Drury Lane and the House of Glorious Youth be fast and furious at the Clubs, and well might Sheridan smile superior as he watched his thronged houses and reviewed his accounts.

He was deeply engrossed now also in the most famous of his plays, "The School for Scandal," and yet deeply engrossed is scarcely the phrase, for he was creating it in brilliant fits and starts as he did all else in life, and Garrick's prologue was finished before the piece itself, to the heavy scandal and reproach of the young author. Elizabeth often threatened to lock him into his study, to put Drury Lane out of bounds, to deport him to East Burnham, anything, everything to hasten the birth of that piece of audacious brilliance which haunted him night and day and yet could so easily be set aside for any beckoning distraction.

Perdita, who was now on friendly terms in Great Queen Street, and often went there to sing and talk with Mrs. Sheridan, arrived one afternoon to find Elizabeth almost weeping over his instability with Mrs. Tickell, her charm-

ing sister. The two were in the drawing room, and for a moment Perdita doubted her welcome, so engrossed were they in lamentation.

"Come in, dear Madam," cries Elizabeth. "Your presence was never more agreeable. My sister and I have resolved, if Chéri will not work, on a deputation from the play-house headed by Mr. Garrick and yourself to assure him that neither the Prologue shall be spoken nor the play played if every single performer has not his or her part a fortnight from now. Nothing short of this will wring it out of him. I thought he was at work last night and hushed the whole house for fear of disturbing him, and lo! this morning he brings me this!"

She held up a paper in her fair hand, half laughing, half sorrowful, and Mrs. Tickell took up the tale.

"One of my sister's foreign birds that he gave her—the avadavat—died yesterday, and will you believe it, Madam, he spent the precious hours composing an elegy on the little songster."

"But it's so charming that none but he could have done it!" added Elizabeth. "It has Chéri's touch in every line. Listen, Mrs. Robinson!"

She recited in her clear voice:

"'Why trickles the tear from Elizabeth's eye,
Why thus interrupted her elegant chat?
Ah, bootless that tear and bootless that sigh,
They cannot revive your poor Avadavat.

"'Each bird that is born of an egg has its date,
No power can lengthen its days beyond that,
Then let us submit to the dictates of fate
And no longer lament the poor Avadavat.

"'Some comfort it is that no violent death
Assailed it from shooter or birdlime or cat
But a common disorder—'"

Mrs. Tickell snatched the paper, laughing, from her sister.

"I've no patience with you, Elizabeth! The way you spoil that man and praise his nonsense—"

"But *such* nonsense!" cries Elizabeth, twinkling. "I declare 'tis better than any one else's sense. Isn't it, Mrs. Robinson? I know you're on my side."

"Indeed—where else could I be!" protests Perdita. "I that think Mr. Sheridan the eighth or was it the ninth wonder of the world! And so it will own some day."

"All the same the play don't get on!" says gay Mrs. Tickell. "Dick owns he is stuck in the beginning of the last act and can't for his life see how to introduce Lady Teazle's perfidy to Sir Peter so neatly, completely and wittily as is due to—"

"The public?"

"No, Madam,—the Sheridan wit. I have suggested a masked ball and domino, but he swears 'tis stale. But who comes here?"

She peeped out between the curtains.

"Lord Edward! Lord, how we rise in society! Promise to recognize your sister, Elizabeth, when Sheridan has perched his dicky-bird at the very tip-top of the tree. He swears he will one day."

But Mrs. Sheridan did not hear her. A faint but most lovely rose had bloomed in her pale cheek, and she stood looking at the door for an instant, then caught up a sheet of music.

"Come, Mrs. Robinson, sing, sing! Our duo—our duo. Mary, play!"

But they were scarcely at the harpsichord when Lord Edward entered, flushed a little also, to face the three pairs of eyes expectant. One pair however did not look up—the music engrossed them.

"We can't talk, we must sing!" she said a little fever-

ishly,—and then the delightfully blended voices broke forth into their gaiety, chasing, eluding each other down silver runnels of melody, flashing into one, darting apart, sparkling, outsoaring one another—into a vibrating silence and the end.

"Enchanting! Inimitable!" he cried, clapping his hands. Perdita shook her head, laughing.

"You never, never heard Mrs. Sheridan sing it with her sister, my Lord, or you would know how I drag it to earth. Those two—they were made to sing together for eternity."

"If I am to believe it could be bettered I must hear them and—"

"No, no, no!" from Mrs. Tickell. "I haven't the heart to sing. We do nothing now but weep over Sheridan. He won't finish his new play that he means to call 'The College for Scandal,' and what we hear is so good that we see riches, fame, fortune, all slowly vanishing in air while we wait in vain. Where is he now, Elizabeth?"

"He went out for the day with a friend," Elizabeth said with reserve. She sat down and drew her tambour frame to her in the shadow of the fine lacquered screen given her by Mr. Hall on her marriage. Her clear delicate features were like a fine pastel against the noble black background. Mrs. Tickell was a handsome woman and Perdita an allowed beauty, but this one had the unworded charm which allied her with every thought, winged and angelic, floating above the noise and soil of earth.

Alas! she was but human, as later events were to prove. A winged thing is made for the cloud-ways and not to tread the miry paths of fashionable life in London.

As she sat talking with Lord Edward, half shaded by the wing of the screen, feet came with a quick running up the stair, and Sheridan entered all flushed with wine and haste, seeing only his sister-in-law and Perdita as

they stood by the harpsichord. The latter he had seen that morning and the former was almost a daily dish, so his greeting was unceremonious.

"Your servant, ladies. Will you tell Elizabeth, for I can't delay that—"

She rose and came round the screen, followed by Lord Edward, with her little hands fluttering towards him—

"Why, Chéri!—" but to her consternation he broke into a loud laugh.

"The screen!" he cried. "Good day, my Lord, and accept my most romantic thanks. Beat my brains how I would I could get no notion for the climax of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle in my fourth act. I have it now. Her Ladyship shall be behind the screen, but alone, the villain of the piece reading a good book at the table. Enter Sir Peter. Talk, talk, and then the screen falls. Tableau! The lady is discovered—all fright and blushes. 'Tis pretty well, I think—don't you, Madam?" this last to Perdita. She clapped her hands.

"Excellent, Mr. Sheridan. I see the screen fall and the dead silence in the house. Oh, I love that silence when a shock has gone straight home to every heart. If instead of going out you could but sit down and write it this minute—"

Her eyes pleaded prettily and fair Mrs. Tickell seconded her.

"Oh, Sheridan, for God's sake get the fourth act done, and the fifth will write itself. What engagement can you have of the same consequence? Elizabeth,—command him!"

Elizabeth had recovered her countenance and Lord Edward was calm good humour itself.

"Could you not stay, Chéri?" she said with the smile she always kept for him.

Sheridan looked her up and down carelessly.

"Why, no! I have an invitation from my Lord Malden to meet the Prince of Wales to-night. A poor theatre manager can't afford to neglect patrons."

There was no more to be said. He was gone as quickly as he came. Perdita gathered her belongings together, and descended with Mrs. Tickell, escorted by Lord Edward, discussing the play as they went. Sheridan had cast Perdita for the part of Maria, the great Mrs. Abington to play Lady Teazle, and privately she had a little grudge against the choice, thinking herself better suited to the fine London lady than the round-faced Mrs. Abington. She had said as much to Sheridan with the threat of a tear in her eye, but he was obdurate.

"For the London lady, yes,—but my Lady Teazle is but a country lass aping the London lady; she must smack of the soil under all her silks and feathers, and you, I believe, were a minx of fashion in your cradle. No, Juliet,—languish with those large eyes of yours through Maria, and set the town aflame. And here let me warn you that if the lovers increase at the rate they do now you must hire a professional letter-writer to keep them off, for what with the play-house and a few other concerns, not to mention the new play, your Corydon must discard the crook that keeps the wolves in order. Could you not mitigate the beams of those two charming eyes?"

This delightful flattery did not however quite assuage her pangs, and already she was revolving an indisposition which should assert her consequence. Play second fiddle to Mrs. Abington? No.

When Lord Edward had bestowed each lady in her chair, he walked slowly along the street considering—a noble figure in his laced fine-cloth coat with great cuffs and collar. The chivalrous Fitzgerald blood was in every line of his aquiline face, where the sensitive lips showed a power of suffering fully to be tested hereafter. He

paused, looked back at the house he had left, half turned, went on, turned again and walked quickly back and was admitted.

When he re-entered the drawing-room, Elizabeth was sitting by the screen with her two-year-old boy on her knee. She was singing him some baby rhyme and the little flushed face and tumbled curls on her bosom made a picture so sweet that Fitzgerald stopped with a kind of delight and awe involuntary that he might not disturb it. Nor did she—she never moved—only welcomed him with her eyes in their ineffable kindliness. He stood looking down upon the lovely pair.

"Forgive me for returning, my dear lady, but there is a question I want to ask you in which candour appears to me the wisest way. Will you hear me?"

She soothed the child's little murmurs with a hand on his curls, and motioned to a chair, but Fitzgerald remained standing.

Before he began, however, he stooped and laid a finger on the bright curls and poppy velvet cheeks shining star-like against her white dress. She took the gesture as the guarantee it was.

"I have thought that Mr. Sheridan—that your husband, is not as friendly to my visits as at the beginning of our friendship. Am I right or wrong? What I have to say turns on that?"

It was a most painful question, for she could not deny that he was right, yet to assent implied a frame of mind so little in her husband, with a distrust so injurious to her, that minimize it how she would she must feel it a window opened on the possibility of domestic unhappiness more likely to grow than not. What to answer she could not tell, and in the difficulty she took a woman's way, said nothing but looked up at him in a silence that

spoke for itself. He answered the look and spared her.

"I see," he said, and paused. Then slowly:

"I thought I had hidden my feelings. God knows I have tried to, but since he has this instinct I have certainly failed. I need make no protestations to you, for you know all the facts and that no word has passed that he and all the world might not hear. Still—I love you. I take no shame in owning it, for what can a man do else but love the best and sweetest that he knows, and for that I cannot reproach myself."

She said not a word, still hushing the child, and he continued as if thinking aloud:

"Should I have ceased to see you when I knew this? I think not. I had no thought but worship, and that your husband, happy in possession of your whole heart, could ever suspect or distrust the beggar who gathered up the crumbs did not occur to me, I own. But since it is so—"

Another silence, and now she hung her head and could not meet his look. The pity in her heart overmastered her, might overflow in words easy to misunderstand, better left unsaid.

"So therefore," he continued quietly, "I shall come no more, except on his invitation. If you think well to tell him what I have said, do so. Tell him that I love his wife with my whole heart and soul, with a devotion unchangeable. That to see her is to me as near an approach to heaven as I am like to realize on earth. But tell him also that it has been no playing with temptation for me in the usual sense, for the only temptation has been to cast aside certain things that hindered me in—in the way to which I am destined."

"And that?" she asked, very low.

"You know, Madam. The service of my very down-

trodden and most miserable country, Ireland. There were distractions—you have cured me of them. You could not tempt any man to other than fine issues. But your brilliant husband—who is an Irishman too—has a perfect right to complain, as the world now is, if another man kindles his torch at the hearth fire that is his. I cannot tell how I myself would take it in his place. The case is unusual. And now I will go, and leave it in your adored hands to tell him what you will. *You* will understand my absence."

She met his look then with what courage she could.

"To lose a friend," she began—then: "I can't tell him. He has moods. He might understand. He might not. But *I* understand. I know. I love him with all my heart and soul,—but indeed I love you too, my friend —my friend. You are full of all the beautiful things a woman clings to when her heart is lonely. And mine is lonely sometimes. Oh, this London! I see him drawn more and more into the whirlpool—gambling, drinking—such men—such fearful men! He has made the acquaintance of Mr. Charles Fox—a man of the loosest life—but such intellect, such political force—oh, my Lord, my heart is very sore. I fear even for the brilliance in my dear, dear husband that all the world praises. Everybody wants him—he gives of his best to every one, and he is too sensitive, too nerve-strained not to be broken. Oh, for East Burnham again, and that we had never heard of this wicked, wicked town. You have a clear purpose and a generous one and your name will be remembered. His will be a bright star stifled in fog. Oh, I am afraid—afraid."

The words poured from her in little sobbing gushes. It had all been so long pent up—the growing fears and carking anxieties. She scarcely thought of the man before her. It was her husband only that filled her heart,

but the relief of unburdening it to Fitzgerald was exquisite. She knew she could trust him to death and beyond, far more truly than she could trust her husband, but—that was all. She used him, as women do, and dismissed him.

That too he understood perfectly. Little, but it meant much to him. She went on passionately.

"Lord Malden—you heard him say—an idle man of fashion, a hunter-down of women—a friend of the young Prince of Wales—the last, *last* people for us! Oh, if only you could keep him out of it—if you could persuade him—"

"I am the last to be able to do that," he said sadly, and then the useless folly and cruelty of her words rushed over her, and she coloured hotly.

"Forgive me. I talk like a mad woman. No, we must go our way. Things may be better than I think. My kind friend, forget all I said—I am not myself to-day. Forgive me."

She stretched out her hand to him—the other holding her child close against her bosom. The tears were brimming down her cheeks, and it cost him a struggle to steel himself to say good-bye. The fashion of the day permitted him to kiss her hand and he did it. With a sudden impulse she lifted the child toward him.

"Kiss him!" she said, as if offering the highest gift she could bestow. He took it in the same spirit, and kissed the warm velvet of the little rosy cheek and wild-bright eyes of surprise, then turned and left her.

CHAPTER IX

THE KNAVE OF HEARTS

Perdita carried out her intention of withdrawing her rays from "The School for Scandal," with, it must be owned, no diminution of the glory achieved by that immortal comedy. Mrs. Abington's plump round face and sparkling eyes were more on the country lass side of my Lady Teazle than on her achieved success as a woman of fashion, but ladies present—themselves gems of the first water—pronounced that she was all the better in the character for this.

"For," as one highly feathered head asserted, swaying to another, "it takes generations to achieve the real modish woman. She is not made in a day nor yet a generation, and Mrs. Abington is all the better because the veneer scratches off so easy and shows the common stuff beneath. Mere pinchbeck—but true to the life!"

Therefore Perdita's opinion that she could have done the character more justice was not general, though she had her partisans. There were jealousies at the playhouse that vexed and alarmed her, and the green room had not the fresh verdure of sympathy and kindness which she had enjoyed on her first night of triumph—others, it seemed, as well as herself could hold the public eye and command applause even if they had but a little of her beauty. Can a woman sensible of her own attractions for ever care to please such a Grand Bashaw of a public? For Sheridan, however, the whole aspect of the world was changed by this starry success. His wife and her sister had literally stood guard upon him till the last line was

written, and when the first night was safely announced they both almost collapsed from sheer fatigue and anxiety.

All the fashion of London crowded the boxes. The lovely Duchess of Devonshire, inseparable in memory from the great hat and plumes with which Gainsborough has crowned her laughing beauty, the more lovely Mrs. Crewe, the famous Amoret, to whom Sheridan had dedicated the play with a warmth of praise which perplexed his Elizabeth, unconscious that he knew the Queen of Fashion intimately enough for such commendation, and many lesser but brilliant stars, crammed the house to overflowing. The audience was frantic with delight, and it is recorded that the journalist, Reynolds, passing the house at the moment when the screen fell and disclosed Lady Teazle, ran for his life, fearing the building would fall before the thunders of applause which shook it and re-echoed down the street. It was performed for longer than even the famous "Beggar's Opera." Gold rained in and the repartees, the epigrams, were on every modish tongue in London. Sheridan's fortune was made.

That Elizabeth might have rejoiced in, and she did. It was much to sit in peace untroubled by tradesmen raging for their dues, to hear less of the anxiety of "debts of honour" which must be met somehow. Yet her sky was not altogether blue and sunshine. This many-faceted success lifted them at once and amazingly into a different sphere of society—more ambrosial, more flattering to every vanity but far more dangerous to her forebodings. The beginning had been an introduction by Perdita to the young Duchess of Devonshire, who had patronized her venture of an elegantly bound volume of sentimental verses before she took to the stage. The Duchess had received her graciously and bestowed a handsome gift in return for the volume, and the interest was continued after her appearance, and led to a meeting with Sheridan

which promised nothing at first, but was fanned with a romantic flame of friendship by the success of "The School for Scandal." Lord Malden, too, began to be a visitor at the house in Great Queen Street, and Elizabeth received wafts of the perfume of those upper regions where her sister could never hope to penetrate, and which had been quite beyond her own ambitions. They still were, but the torrent was too strong for her. Sheridan was dizzy, feverish, half-frenzied with delight. Popularity, flattery, were a stronger drink than his quick Irish nature could stand. The inevitable future was upon them.

But for Perdita also the world was not to stand still. Her hour was upon her also.

After the furore of "The School for Scandal" had a little subsided, it was notified to the manager of Drury Lane that their Majesties, King George and Queen Charlotte, would honour the playhouse, and that he would be required to submit the names of certain Shakespearian plays for their approval. It was, of course, known that his Majesty considered the Swan of Avon "sad stuff" on the whole, so much so that little was left worthy of royal commendation. Still, Shakespeare is as much a national institution as the Lion and the Unicorn and must occasionally be patronized. There was at first a talk of "Macbeth," but King George's well-known dislike of tragedy led to the substitution of "The Winter's Tale." Sheridan had another reason for pushing this forward. A royal wish had been hinted—the appearance of the fashionable actress, Mrs. Robinson, and in his deliberate judgment the sweet and artless Perdita of "The Winter's Tale" was by far the best of her parts. It did not overtask her art. She was sweet as the flowers of Warwickshire which crowded Shakespeare's happy eyes as he wrote of the delicate darling of the shy woods.

So it was determined, and Perdita, not terrified as on

that first awful but splendid night which made her free of the boards, but still tremulous, for Royalty is Royalty and little short of heaven condescending to earth, stood, ready dressed, her best and beautifulest, as Smith, the Leontes of the play, approached her with a compliment.

"Gad, Mrs. Robinson, I never saw you look so handsome. The Prince of Wales is here to-night. You'll certainly make a conquest of him."

The Prince! The words struck a chord of memory—touching and pleasing. How well did she remember that night at the Pantheon, and the bright blushing face of the Royal lad, and his fixed stare and the mutual confusion of their young shyness. She smiled a little to herself. She had outgrown that innocent shyness now.

"He's quite a young man now, I suppose, Mr. Smith. I saw his Royal Highness once long, long ago."

"Oh, a very gay young spark, with the most charming easy manners in the world, they say, sings well, knows his Homer. The agreeablest young man in England if he were only a Squire's son. I shouldn't wonder if he has an eye for a pretty face though they do keep him up so strict. If so we can promise him pleasure to-night, I think. The old house won't disgrace itself!"

She laughed pleasantly, and went on. Near two years —longer than that, a lifetime to her feelings—had gone by since she had seen the Prince, and as she curtseyed to the Royal box before commencing Perdita shot a swift and searching glance of curiosity past their Majesties to the son of all their hopes and fears. He sat, carelessly leaning a little back and surveying the house, and she dared not do more than glimpse him, but what cannot a woman's observation record when she is put to it,—and she could have drawn a picture of him next moment.

There was no disappointment. He was as perfect a Prince Charming as loyal heart could wish, features ele-

gantly clear and distinguished, set off by the powdered tied-back hair with a formal curl over each ear, a mouth shaped for love and laughter, eyes to flash or soften at need, a light, extremely well-set figure, amply fulfilling the promise of his earlier youth. His dress, too, suited him magnificently well—a rich blue Genoa velvet, splendidly laced with gold embroidery, setting off the young fine-coloured face and powdered head with the last touch of distinction. A sort of litany of his great titles ran through her romantic head to stamp his royalty—Prince of Wales, Duke of Rothsay, Lord of the Isles, and how many more, danced glittering before her and all but overwhelmed the sentimentalist. How many streams of splendour converged in that young pride and brightness!

No—no—she must think of her part. She was but a humble mime performing for the amusement of her sovereign lords. Well, they should be amused.

She exerted herself to the utmost and was obliged to do so, for it was difficult indeed for an actress to catch the attention of the women in the audience from this delightful young Royal apparition.

For the Prince, not yet having an establishment of his own, and most strictly guarded at Buckingham House and Kew, very seldom graced the theatre with his presence, and every glass, every eye, in the house was far more eagerly turned on him than on the stage. He seemed conscious enough of this, and looked about him with smiling pleasure. Difficult to fix. She redoubled her efforts, and as Sheridan said after, never did herself greater justice. Indeed she was piqued and it gave her an energy she sometimes lacked. Suddenly she realized that she had held him. He was watching her with an absolutely fixed absorption. Let who would speak, while she was on the stage his eyes pursued her everywhere,

and at last it appeared to her as if all the world must observe that the Heir to the Throne could do nothing else but watch every motion of the disguised stage Princess. It gave just the stimulus her playing needed, and when she retired into the wing opposite the Prince's box to wait for her next cue, she knew that his eyes still followed her, and she was so flushed and sparkling that it seemed as if the very air must scintillate about her.

Lord Malden, who had now succeeded his father as Earl of Essex, joined her at once and trilled forth a perfect roulade of compliments and elegant trifles ("The pink-heeled fop!" as Sheridan growled in the background, alluding to his Lordship's pink satin and silver coat and heels to match)—Perdita, usually not averse either from such coats or compliments, could lend but a divided attention, so conscious was she of the following eyes in the Prince's box which commanded the corner where she stood with Lord Essex. She answered at random. She turned her charming head to the angle whence she could look up without appearing to do so. Yes, he was watching still. He never turned away. The boxes glittered with ladies of the greatest fashion, for a Royal command night naturally drew the stars about the sun, but he was fixed. If he spoke to Colonel Lake and Mr. Legge, who were in attendance, it was still with his eyes on her. She had succeeded so well that it half frightened her.

The audience was vehement in its applause when she went on again. Her own efforts and the Prince's evident enthusiasm warmed her into fire, and the more so because, having an excellent Florizel to second her, the love-scenes were rendered to perfection. And as she stood close beneath the Prince's box which abutted on the stage, she heard him with her own happy ears say in reply to

Colonel Lake—"The most charming creature I ever saw. A perfect beauty. And good Ged, what an actress! I would not have missed this for worlds!"

As a matter of fact, it was almost too much for her loyal sensibilities, for every one within eyeshot noticed the Prince's particular attention, and she knew very well that she must face the green-room comments and envious congratulations at the least. At the end of the play the company formed up for a last bow and curtsey, and with a look which Perdita declared to Sheridan she should never forget, the Prince not only bowed once but gently inclined his head a second time and obviously in her sole interest. She felt the intention and blushed her gratitude.

She did more; she blushed her memories also and re-lit his, for the look was the arrested, fascinated attention of former years. Now as then, it shot a something connecting across the gulf which separated the Prince from the player. They were no strangers, had not been, could not be, so it seemed to say.

The pink-heeled fop who had devoted himself to her in the intervals became an impertinence in this new uplifting. She listened heedlessly with her eyes still on the Royal Family crossing the stage. Her satin cloak furred with ermines was about her now, her face looked out from it like a dark damask rose fallen on a snow-bed. The Prince lingered behind his parents and bowed low—with marked deference. My Lord Essex turned to her:

"You caught his eye indeed, Madam Perdita," says he. "I never saw his Royal Highness so charmed before. He has all his House's fine taste in beauty, and will some day show the world how he values it as distinctively as his uncles Cumberland and Gloucester have done before him."

His Lordship of course alluded to the marriages of

these two Royal Dukes, the Duke of Gloucester with Miss Maria Walpole, illegitimate daughter of Sir Edward Walpole and widow of the Earl of Waldegrave, and the Duke of Cumberland with the gay Mrs. Horton, *née* Luttrell, marriages which had occasioned the most alarming scandals owing to the indignation of their Majesties and many others at such painful *mésalliances*. But the very name of Cumberland chilled Perdita. She had seen his detested face in the box with his Duchess, whose reputation also was not of the most dignified, and for the moment it had discomposed her. Though no reply had ever been made to her insulting billet she knew well it must have been received and could not understand why he attended many of her performances and yet made no sign of anger or anything but indolent and somewhat close observation. She supposed the whole matter forgotten and that his interest was merely in the drama, and yet could not view him without a kind of discomfort difficult to be explained.

She smiled at my Lord Essex's allusion however, saying merely:

"Surely a different matter with the Heir to the Crown, my Lord? His marriage must be a matter of national concern."

"And what will the nation ask better than to see a fine young man dispose himself where he has given his heart? Mark my words, Mrs. Robinson, the Prince of Wales is one who will please himself in his marriage, resent it who will. I who live in almost daily companionship with him have a right to my opinion."

Words strangely to be proved and disproved in the coming years, though Perdita listened incredulous. Still the words sank into her heart and added yet another touch of romance to the young Royalty, and she lingered with Lord Essex, and like her foremother Eve "did seri-

ously incline" to hear all that could be told of his manners and views.

She could not get away from him even at the supper party she was giving at her house near the theatre in Covent Garden. It was a gay gathering, for the evening had put the seal on Perdita's success, and for some time past she had been so much the fashion as to set it in modish quarters of the town. Her woman, Mrs. Armstead, a handsome woman with an intelligent dark face, was often nowadays approached by ladies in the first flight of fashion with entreaties for exclusive information as to whether Mrs. Robinson's winter gowns would be chiefly of satin or velvet, and what furs she had determined to patronize. She had prepared for this occasion a dress of mother-of-pearl white satin with a knot of holly-berries and glistening dark green leaves in compliment to the December season, her lady's hair dressed with the same scarlet berries and white feathers, and as she left the room the maid could not forbear an exclamation of admiration at her own handiwork.

"And I am the more glad, Madam," she added, "because Mr. Higham sent this evening while you were playing to say that he proposed with your permission to bring Mr. Charles James Fox to your supper, and we all know he has the reputation for recognizing a beauty when he sees her."

A familiarity which Mrs. Armstead (who knew her world and was later to take a singular place in it) would not have ventured with any but a player-lady, as she somewhat scornfully called her mistress. It pleased Perdita however as she trailed her satin down the stair to her drawing-room, holding her head aloft with the deer-like carriage which set off the line of her long throat,—Mrs. Armstead leaning with crossed arms over the stair-rail above.

Mr. Higham, obsequious, with Mr. Fox beside him, was posted at the door. All the guests had assembled while their hostess changed her dress from Perdita's, and the Prince, the Prince, was on every lip. The air vibrated with him, his charms, his grace, his beauty. A wave of this commendation engulfed her as she entered, and greeted her from Mr. Fox as he bowed, gross and beetle-browed, before her.

"Why, Madam, what can any man say after thanking you for your gracious hospitality,—but that you have stormed the last fort left to conquer. I hear the Queen was enchanted—not that her commendation has any value, except among some of the antiquated Tory families. But the Prince!—the whole house observed that he had no power to remove his eyes from you. I felicitate you on the most important conquest in the habitable world."

She fluttered charmingly.

"Oh, Mr. Fox! Surely the King—"

"Madam, the King has neither eyes nor ears. No, in this house dedicated to Beauty and Genius, let us salute the rising sun, and toss off our glasses to the young, the irresistible, the Prince of Hearts—the darling of the nation!"

He said it with such an infectious enthusiasm that it gave the keynote of the evening. All that was not in Perdita's honour was in the Prince's. Champagne flowed like water and when it had made several rounds the company was so far mellowed that at last the two charmers were joined in a toast given by Mr. Fox on his legs and all the company standing: "The Prince and the genius and beauty he has the royal taste to comprehend and encourage—the Prince and the fair Perdita!"

They drank it with three times three, and a crabbed neighbour next door sent in to complain of the noise and

did not damp the enthusiasm. Perdita, in reply, gave some sentiment with regard to Mr. Fox as the guide and inspirer of something or somebody, but for the life of her could not afterwards remember what or whom. The flattery and champagne combined had intoxicated her and rendered her forgetful of all but a world where it mattered little what a woman said or did not say provided only she were charming. And that she was this in the highest degree men and women alike assured her. Mr. Fox, sitting at her right hand with the delightful Mrs. Tickell opposite, showed his appreciation in a series of slow dominant approaches which she found herself quite unable to repel. He took agreement and invitation for granted, and with a veiled desire in his heavy-lidded eyes invaded her on some plan of his own which she was in too high excitement to discern very clearly. The man had the black-browed attractive ugliness of his ancestor, King Charles the Second. Like him also his reputation with women was scandalous, and Perdita knew it, as who did not? But she had heard a whisper running about London that already his influence with the young Prince was marked, and that gave him an interest with her which he could never have exercised otherwise.

"But beware, beware, Perdita!" whispered pretty Mrs. Tickell, when she secured a minute with her. "Don't pane-tiddle (play the fool) with Fox! He's a great big gollupshious monster and if you have him sprawling about your hearth-rug the Tabbies will soon be clawing you and scratching out your eyes."

"Indeed I flatter myself I shall give them no cause as regards Mr. Fox, Madam," says Perdita, tossing her lovely head with the scarlet berries. "I have no taste for monsters, China or otherwise, and design to choose better if ever I put myself in the way of scandal, which I won't." Mrs. Tickell's eyes danced.

"Even that precaution won't conciliate the Tabbies—they'll scandalize you with an archangel and with the more zest. And when they get you down—Lord help you! They'll pick you to the bone. Humanity's not the failing of your true Purrers. Be on your guard."

It infuriated Perdita, her eyes bedazzled with the glittering Prince, that Mrs. Tickell or any other should suppose it possible she needed a caution where Fox was concerned, and the angrier she grew the more delighted was Mrs. Tickell to quiz her. Indeed, on the way home she must needs stop her chair in Great Queen Street to trot upstairs with her budget and burst in upon Elizabeth, sitting by the fire hanging over the theatre accounts.

"Don't bepuppy (scold) me, Ma'am, but I couldn't go by you with the news that all the town will bubble with to-morrow. Perdita has captured the Prince! He couldn't remove his eyes from her, and sighed until he fluttered all the feathers in all the boxes. And Fox was at her supper after, enjoying his broilo bono and making love to her with *his* eyes. So then up speaks my little I when I got her alone and warned her she won't have a least chance with the Tabbies if that gets about. Lord, she was so angry! Her head is simmering with the Prince, and no wonder."

"Lord, Mary, are you in earnest?" cries Elizabeth, dismayed. "For if so—Heaven forbid! Oh, my dear, if you did but know the confusion it will bring our affairs! I hope 'tis only a boy's sheep's eyes and no harm done. But she is too good a woman—"

"No woman's too good a woman when a Prince is in question," says Mrs. Tickell, nodding her gay little head until her feathers made a breeze of their own. "If it isn't a Linley—that's to say. Lord, the Linleys—and who but they! Fox challenged us all to-night, men and women, to make epigrams on Hayley's 'Serena.' You

wouldn't read it, but you know 'tis all about female patience under trial and as dull as a suet dumpling, and Serena herself duller. Well, what should pop out of me like a cork out of a champagne bottle but this verse—and set the room in a roar:

> " 'With female patience here's to do
> Serena and her trials three.
> But *I* have read the poem through!
> What d'you think of *me!*'

Wasn't it smart, Ma'am? Could any but a Linley have popped it out so pat? No doubt we're all geniuses, as little Tom said, and myself the foremost."

She stopped, all sparkling, and suddenly threw her arms about her sister.

"No! 'Tis you, 'tis you that's the only Linley genius, and the one woman of the world, my heart's darling! There isn't a Linley fit to kiss your feet—let alone any one else. And you as pale as pale!—go to bed, for God's sake, and don't hang over those infernal papers, and stay abed to-morrow morning and send me a fiff (note) to say how you do. And the deuce take Mrs. R. and her lovers!"

They stayed a moment embraced, each fair head by the other, and then Mary Tickell sprang apart laughing.

"Well—good-night, Ma'am, and God thee bless! Don't forget the fiff."

And so down the stair with her and off and away to her home and babies,—Tickell at a drinking bout with Sheridan and a few choice spirits to celebrate the success of the play. Success indeed was generally launched with libations of claret and other such agreeable liquors at Drury Lane.

The evening was voted a brilliant occasion, a fitting

crown to her triumph, and as Perdita bid her guests farewell, her eyes blazed contagious fires; she felt herself not only a beauty but a wit, a genius, capable of taking her place in any society, of shining in the highest firmaments open to mortal effort. She fell asleep with the Prince's and Fox's faces oddly interchangeable in flattery and repulsion, and could not distinguish one from the other before they melted together in forgetfulness.

Fox, hitching his arm in Higham's, summed up the situation as clearly as the champagne and brandy he carried would permit.

"A charming woman, though by no means so clever as beautiful. I never saw a handsomer if it were not Amoret, and something in the same softly voluptuous style—every glance an invitation. No wonder Prinny was struck down. And did you observe a good-looking bright-eyed wench in a cap on the stair? The waiting-woman, I take it. I am much mistook if she have not more brains than her pretty mistress. Well, here's good luck to them both! I design to see more of the fair Perdita—the little fascinating sentimentalist! A Lydia Languish, if ever I saw one. Sherry must have had her in his eye when he drew the fair romantic."

They reeled off together arm in arm.

CHAPTER X

ADVANCE AND RETREAT

While Perdita (now to be universally known as Perdita) sipped her chocolate in bed next morning Sheridan sent round a message from the theatre that he would call and see her at twelve o'clock. The message surprised her, for he was none too early a bird himself, as many of those connected with Drury Lane knew to their cost. Mrs. Armstead brought the billet, and stood waiting while she read it and scribbled a reply. She lingered a moment with it in her hand.

"I was on the bend of the stair last night, Madam, while Mr. Fox and Mr. Higham were getting their coats."

Perdita yawned an "Indeed," and composed herself for another lazy hour. The impression Fox had made upon her had worn off in sleep. He now appeared merely a gross-looking young man who could be of no consequence to the brilliant Mrs. Robinson. It was perhaps as well to have met him, for he was a friend of Sir John Lade's, who was constantly at her house. That was all she knew. But still Mrs. Armstead lingered.

"They spoke of you, Madam."

She did not even exert herself to lift the lovely lashes sleeping on her cheek.

"Indeed."

"Yes, Madam. Mr. Fox said he understood from my Lord Essex whom he saw on leaving Drury Lane that the Prince of Wales was absolutely thunderstruck by your beauty and the talent with which you played. He said

he could not have believed that one sight of any person could have had such an effect."

The lashes scarcely moved, but the eyes beneath them were awake.

"Indeed?"—for the third time.

"Yes, Madam. Mr. Fox is known to be in all the Prince's secrets and—"

"It's very strange, I think," said Perdita with dignity, "that a woman in your position should pretend to know the Prince's confidants."

Mrs. Armstead smoothed her apron with composure.

"It would be stranger still if I did not know them, Madam, since the matter is discussed everywhere together with the ill terms the Prince is on with their Majesties."

Perdita opened her eyes widely now and considered her attendant, a handsome woman with an educated way of expressing herself which had surprised her at the beginning of their acquaintance.

"You must have some motive," she said, "in telling me this. I never thought you one for idle gossip."

"You do me only justice, Madam. My motive I must leave to yourself. But certainly Mr. Fox will be one of the most considerable persons in England."

She busied herself with some laces and ribbons and shortly after left the room without any further disclosures, Perdita, instead of sleeping, reflecting on what had passed. She would have been perhaps a little clearer as to motives had she known that Mr. Fox, leaving Mr. Higham still hunting for his coat for a moment, had ascended to the bend of the stair and paid a few compliments to the handsome woman in cap and lace apron, ending with a word of more importance.

"The Prince is mightily taken with your lady. You will see more of him and of myself, Mrs. Abigail" ("Armstead, Sir!" she corrected him with a touch of pride)—

"eh? Yes—Mrs. Armstead. There is interest in serving a lady of such consequence and I would beg you accept this as an earnest."

Yet Fox with all his perspicuity did not at all divine Mrs. Armstead's reflections as he slid his gift into her hand, and was profoundly astonished when she returned it gravely.

"I thank you, Sir,—but I am not in the habit of accepting gifts from strangers. I have all I need," and so went quietly up the stair out of reach. These matters she kept to herself.

Sheridan found Perdita still shining with the excitement of the previous evening. She sprang to meet him like the girl she was at heart, crying:

"What more worlds have I to conquer, Mr. Sheridan? I saw his Majesty's delight, and her Majesty relaxed more than once into the softest, most gracious smile! Unless we go as strollers and capture the Czar of Muscovy I see not what's left to do!"

"The interests of this puny island are not however exhausted," says Mr. Sheridan, offering her a chair and taking one. She could not but reflect how handsome and becoming he looked in his blue coat with his vivid eyes and features in the clear morning light. His eyes indeed were a dancing brilliance—and this is no romancer's fancy. The great Sir Joshua Reynolds declared more than once that he had never painted eyes with pupils so enlarged to reflect and emit light as Sheridan's. They caught and held attention and made his every word sad, glad, witty, inspiring as he would have it at the moment. Youth and genius expressed in the liveliest terms. Indeed she smiled for the mere pleasure of his company.

"I never said they were!" says she. "How could they where Mr. Sheridan's genius scintillates and coruscates

and fireworks and outdoes Vauxhall and Ranelagh in brilliance every time I see him!"

He bowed with his hand on his heart.

"Actress!" says he. "Not a word of it do you mean! However I come with a warning this time. You'll think my conversation a perpetual libel, so beset is it with alarms and censures on other persons' intentions. But you're my first consideration—Juliet—no, Perdita, in future! Why will you be such a beautiful woman? The half of it would serve you on the stage and preserve you from a part of the malice of green room tattle, and a quarter of it would still give your shepherd as many wolves to hunt as he had a mind for!"

"What now?" says Perdita, laughing gaily at his droll face. She was so used to her triumphs by this time that a wolf more or less made no odds in the count, and indeed it is possible she would have missed the incense and adoration however she might seem to despise it.

He crossed his legs, leaning back in the chair and looked full at her.

"I think you know as well as I, Madam, that in the play of last night Perdita is beloved by a certain Prince Florizel. There was another Florizel, not on the stage, who could not keep his eyes off her. Don't tell me you don't know it. Women know everything of the kind which flatters or crosses them. Indeed, my dear, the Prince of Wales never took his eyes off you."

"And pray why should he?" The lady tossed her head charmingly. "I am sure there was nothing else in the house so well worthy looking at! You don't dare call His Royal Highness a wolf, I hope, Sir?"

"That remains to be seen! But I am not arrived at the point yet, Madam. If His Royal Highness choose to stare at a lady like a suck-a-thumb at lollipops for a whole evening he must expect that all the world will stare

at him as well as with him. But that again is not the point. I received a summons to attend His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland in his box—"

The laugh dropped from her face instantly. Indeed, she had a most instinctive horror of that bad man. He continued to a pale listener.

" 'Twas to say he had never had the felicity to see me since 'The School for Scandal' took the town and to present me to his impudent jilt of a Duchess. They were there to mortify the King and Queen, to whom it is gall and wormwood to see them, and there she sat playing off her glances on every one in the house that had an eye to spare for her Notorietyship. No sooner was I presented than she levelled their fire at me and I perceived the truth of Mr. Walpole's description of her that I heard from Mr. Fox—'Most amorous eyes,' he wrote, 'and eyelashes a yard long.' Indeed a captivatingly pretty women and yet with something about her that to an eye of my experience says 'Beware—and yet again, beware!' "

"But the warning!" palpitated Perdita, too anxious to relish this hovering on another woman's charms.

"Ay—that springs from the eyelashes. They're not irrelevant. She says with a mincing prettiness, 'Oh, the charming Perdita! Such beauty is impossible off the stage with its aids in lighting and colouring. What wonder she runs away with the golden apple from us all! His Royal Highness and I could scarce take our eyes from her, unless it was to see how the Prince of Wales stared her out of countenance. He nearly put her off her part more than once, and she turned from the mock Florizel to the real one with a zest which if Her Majesty perceives— Well, I should be apt to predict trouble.' The Duke, heavy and dull by her side, nodded approval. Much more was said on various matters and

I was indulged with a close inspection of the famous eyelashes in their various postures of rally, advance and retreat, and more than glimpses of the best-formed bosom in the world bar one or two I could mention. The civility was pretty well, I thought, considering my part in a certain billet. If they could have guessed it! But what does Perdita's wisdom deduce from all this?"

"Fear!" said she, looking at him with melancholy great eyes. "The Duke terrifies me, and something within has always predicted to me that my life could not be a happy one. How should it, situated as I am? What is your thought, my friend?"

"Why, this. At the time of the Duke's pursuit of you 'twas freely talked of by the town and nothing more unlikely than that it escaped his wife's ears. We may conclude then that malice is the mildest word to express her feelings. And as for him—did any of that family ever pardon an injury? I fear, child, we sowed trouble when we indited that terse little billet, and that you will harvest it unless you walk like a fair Vestal. And that's much to ask of a stage favourite, with eyelashes not so long by half a yard as Her Royal Highness's of Luttrell, but how infinitely more seductive! You had made a better Duchess than she, though the Luttrells are a great family."

"Was there a word more?" cries Perdita, anxiously passing over the compliment.

"Only one. When I made my bow—'Bye, bye, Mr. Sheridan,' says the complete Minx. 'Pray inform Mrs. Robinson of the pleasure and instruction she has furnished the Royal Family with this night.' That ended it. But those two are on the *qui vive*, my dear."

"You alarm me dreadfully, but what can I do or undo? You know better than any other how careful I am. It's true crowds of visitors come to my house now, and I

must dress and be gay for my profession's sake. But, excepting yourself, I now never see a man alone that's under fifty!"

"Fifty!" he echoed. "Damnable tottering doddering fifty! And yet, Madam, you may find that even fifty with two legs in the grave may be open to the artillery of a pair of fine eyes! I would have you extend your limit to ninety, for I've known even seventy more inflammable than became it by a long way. The old villain!"

"Not in our sex, Mr. Sheridan," says Perdita demurely. "We have more sense of what's becoming our grey hairs!"

"Why, Madam, that's only because nature, recognizing the greater mischief, cuts its claws earlier to give our unfortunate sex a chance. If you were potent till seventy—oh, Lord!"

She smiled, but returned to her point.

"Well, but what would you have me do? If the Prince condescended to admire me 'tis not my fault. As likely as not he'll never see me again or think nothing of me if he does. Do you mean you think the Duke will have me lampooned—or a clique made to ruin me with the public? As for the Duchess, one would suppose she should be grateful to me for despising her husband's libertine attentions."

"She should. She ought. But do women ever do what they should or ought, and would they have eyelashes a yard long and use them to such purpose if they did? Consider, Perdita. You robbed her of her husband's—no, I can't foul the word 'affections' by using it—and not content with that you then had the impudence to despise what she waded through the mud to secure. Indeed you're a damnable offender, and you shall pay dear if they can compass it."

"Mr. Sheridan, for God's sake, say straight out what you mean. I entreat you, my only friend. Who else must I turn to!"

He looked at her, veiling earnestness with laughter in true Sheridan fashion.

"The Prince, Perdita—the Prince! I declare if a Princess ogled me from the Royal box I won't answer for myself. Royal eyes have a magic— But if a Prince Florizel became a rival to his wicked uncle Humgruffin,—why then—why then—the little earth pipkin between the two big iron pots runs a mighty chance of smashing into smithereens. You have too much sensibility, Madam, for a King's mistress. You are a romantic with your high flights and your verses and vapours. For such a post it needs—"

But she interrupted in a flash.

"Mr. Sheridan, I'll be no man's mistress. If I could resist the temptation to hear *you*—"

She stopped, horrified at herself, and coloured painfully from chin to brow. Extraordinary man! There was no exultation in the look he cast upon her.

"If!" he said. "That was a saving If. When you have been longer in the world, Perdita, you will know that no man—no woman resists a real temptation. 'Tis impossible. We follow always what most delights us. The only temptations are those we succumb to. Ponder this and you will find it true. You loved the answer of an untroubled conscience better than me, and certainly I own it worth more. The applause of the public for a virtuous actress. The company of the strait-laced grimalkins who would turn their backs on you if—Ah, no. You loved twenty things better than me. You never loved me. And to be honest, I never loved you. For I loved your chance in life better—your reputation, my wife—fifty trifles. You stare at me with great eyes

and don't comprehend a word I say. Wait till you stand alone between God and man—each tempting you to some purpose, and then by your decision I'll tell you what you really are. I swear I don't know now."

He picked up his hat, looking her in the face with smiling lips and eyes that did not smile. Presently he added:

"And I have another temptation now, which, being one, I shan't oppose with my weakness. Politics, Perdita! What, will they laugh at the Drury Lane director in the House of Commons? Let them try. Fox and I—"

But he broke off, laughing again.

"Beware of the Prince, Madam! The Shepherd will soon perforce be off duty, and I know none other to be trusted with the crook. Quis custodiet— But you are no Latinist. Shall Fox be your Lubin? Good-bye."

She felt herself repulsed and could not understand him. He kissed her fingers lightly and went off. She pondered much over that scene for a while.

It was not more than two or three days later that my Lord Essex was announced to visit her, and it may be imagined with what eagerness she flew to the glass to cast her eyes over her morning *déshabillé* and judge if she should fall before her appearance on the stage. Indeed she had no cause to fear. Perdita in simple white and blue ribbons was no less an epitome of youthful beauty than Perdita in pink satin and spangles. It might perhaps be allowed that the very simplicity gave her a more touching interest, and the masses of silken dark hair piled and curled on her elegant head evinced their beauty better thus than built up into a ceremonious edifice with powder and feathers. No figure could be more engaging. Lord Essex was all embarrassment as he responded to her curtsey—a manner very unlike that of their first meeting. He cleared his throat, he hummed and hawed, hesi-

tated, apologized, and still delayed to speak his business. Beauty naturally concluded it was but one conquest the more and prepared her weapons for a rout that should leave as little wound behind it as possible. Peers and personages must needs have a golden bridge built for their retreat—unless temper overmasters tact. The opening was exactly what she expected.

He hoped she would pardon him—er—er—that she would undertake—er—never to mention what he had to communicate, er—that she would consider the unusual delicacy of his situation. Here a long and nerve-racking pause. That she would pardon him beforehand, condescend to hear, and then act as she thought proper. Another pause.

Used to these hesitations and the delicacies of indelicate situations this went on so long that she became a little weary with the delay and, anxious for the inevitable to be over, marked it by glancing at the clock. He took her meaning at once.

"Madam, a thousand pardons. I grow tedious—but really—"

He paused again and considered, then tremblingly drew a small letter from his pocket and offered it. She took it, almost equally astonished as he was embarrassed; it was addressed "To Perdita."

She opened the brief but warm love-letter she expected. It was signed "Florizel," but since her success more than one aspirant had adopted that signature. With a studied carelessness she swept my Lord with her eyelashes.

"Well, my Lord, and what does this mean? Yourself?"

"Upon my honour, no!" he cried earnestly. "I should not have dared on so short an acquaintance. Can you not guess the writer?"

"Not in the least. May I ask whose Mercury you are? I own the part seems to me a little undistinguished for a gentleman of your Lordship's rank."

The fine curl of her lip added sting to her words. The young man coloured scarlet.

"I hope I shall not forfeit your good opinion," says he. "I am well aware I risk it, yet could not refuse, for my commission is from—the Prince of Wales."

She did not believe it. There were a thousand reasons why it seemed impossible—utterly incredible, and she suspected a trap. She folded the billet and returned it.

"My Lord, every successful actress is in the way of such things, and since men hold the agreeable creed that all's fair in love and war women must defend themselves as best they may. Pray tell me from whom this letter really is."

It may have flashed across Essex's mind that a woman of impregnable virtue would scarcely have troubled her head as to the writer—the insult would be all. But he was himself so fluttered by his position that he was not an accurate judge at the moment of anything but the beauty of her angry eyes as she looked him straight in the face. He shifted from one foot to the other like the veriest prentice boy before his inamorata.

"Can you suppose, Madam, that any man, and especially one of rank dare assert His Royal Highness had signed a letter like this unless it were true? Your innocence alone can account for such a strange suspicion."

Her silence gave him courage to proceed.

"And surely there is no insult in this letter. It is but a wish to make the acquaintance of one who charmed him and all the world on the stage. His Royal Highness simply expresses the hope that such an opportunity may be given him. He is a great lover of the arts. And if he expresses a warm admiration he only does what thou-

sands of his future subjects agree in. I see nothing in it to offend even such delicacy as yours."

She stretched out her hand for the letter and read it again, leaning her cheek on one hand as she studied it, then sighed a little.

"Life is very difficult. One knows not whom to trust. It may be as you say, and if the letter is really the Prince's— Sure to meet His Royal Highness is an honour that every subject must aspire to. Yet—"

"There's no 'Yet,' Madam. It *is* an honour and one, let me tell you, vouchsafed to few. May I hope to be the bearer of a favourable answer?"

But there she stuck. No, she would not write. But *if* the letter were from his Royal Highness then my Lord Essex might inform him that Mrs. Robinson was truly sensible of the honour done her, and that her gratitude for the Royal commendation was deep and sincere. More she could not as yet say—nor would his Royal Highness's generosity expect it.

Lord Essex overflowed in thanks and praises of such charming affability. He rose with alacrity, having attained quite as much as he expected, and departed with the respect he might have reserved for a Princess of the Blood and a smile unperceived by the pensive Perdita. Her agitation which was unnecessary, if there were nothing behind it, discounted her formality and the doubt which must be expected in any case. We may imagine how light-foot he returned to the young eager lover who thus ventured on his first open essay in the mazes of love, and almost risked his liberty in doing it, so strict was the Royal watch on him. And Perdita, left to herself, sat with her chin in her hand tortured by guesses and regrets. Was it truly from the Prince? Even then she could not be sure. Men of fashion were equal to any plan of daring to attain their purposes. False mar-

riages, abductions, violence, were the order of the day, and an actress fair prey. It might even be some scheme of the Duke of Cumberland. Every terror was alert in her.

But yet—if it *were* the Prince—then, oh, then, there was much to consider. The honour—the overwhelming astounding honour to be beloved by the first Prince in all the world, and to be known as the woman whose spotless chastity repelled what half—nay, nearly all the women in the world would scramble to attain. Roman notions of virtue rose in her mind. She saw herself a Lucretia—a Vestal (and here a swift side thought—What a position on the stage were it to get about she had refused the Prince! The crowds—the admiration—curiosity!). Yet—Lucretia. She saw herself in dignified calm avoiding the burning glances from the Royal box, while all the world leaned forward to intercept a glance—a breath. She saw the tears in his eyes—his despair.

"No, Sir,—for your sake and mine, for I too, poor actress as I am, have my honour, and it is unsullied. And you—the descendant of a hundred kings—" She saw, she enacted the scene, and left him kneeling, pale and despairing while she swept from the room with a resolution softened with pity and regret. Suppose he never recovered it—suppose some mad act.—And then reason interposed with: Suppose he never wrote the letter at all! Suppose if he had, it was a boy's whim, and a hundred other supposes less dramatic but more sensible than the first.

She knew not what to think, and sat there reading and re-reading the letter and a hundred things in it which the writer had never imagined himself, and finally roused herself, so perplexed and distracted that all who saw her concluded Mr. Robinson's peccadilloes had reached

breaking-point. And who could wonder? She was indeed almost overwhelmed by the magnitude of her conquest. Let the moralist bring the figure of Mr. Robinson awfully on the scene. Yet he cannot present it in the majesty of a justly indignant husband. Though it would be sorry work to depict the reasons why his wife must unalterably despise him, they were many and various, and Mr. Sheridan, no overstrict censor of manly morals, had again and again urged her to quit him if she hoped to retain either peace or self-respect. And 'twas not this only. Her future loomed dark before her, if she was to be drained of every profit her exertions brought in. Indeed this young creature was formed for better things and had shone like a star in a clear sky, but could shed only scanty beams amid the clouds that obscured her.

Her beauty was the least part of her talents, for she possessed a kind of sensitiveness of spirit that made her quick and ready in talk and writing, and herself aiming always to express her thoughts in verse and prose of a high if not the highest order. 'Twas not for nothing that Burgoyne hailed her "perfect as woman and artist," that St. John asserted "nature had formed her queen of song," and Tickell, himself a poet, saluted her, "the British Sappho," but that was later. At present it must be owned the world engrossed her, and the triumphs of life crowding thick upon her vanquished the pensive shapes of thought and inspiration. They certainly obliterated Mr. Robinson's.

Therefore she sat with the Prince's letter before her, almost tortured by fears and hopes as she read its glowing words.

CHAPTER XI

A SPRING THAW

But for that last interview Perdita would certainly have consulted Sheridan. Now she felt it impossible. There was a sense of removal, separation, new interests developing in which she had no part. Politics! She scarcely dwelt on that side of his words because it really conveyed nothing to her. The country was governed by the King with the two Houses under him, but how she had never troubled herself to think, and that Sheridan should have any concern with such things was too fantastic to take any shape in her mind. She did not even connect his mention of Fox with Mrs. Armstead's. Indeed she could not give much thought to him at all, her own pre-occupations were so many.

She had a small card party next evening, when she wore a satin dress flowered with silver of her own designing—a sacque, now little worn, coquettishly panniered and pouffed—and certainly, as the hair-dresser shook the last cloud of powder over her hair and disengaged her from the powdering gown that she might study the effect in the glass, the thought crossed her mind that if Prince Florizel should stand beside her in his blue velvet and orders, they would be as charming a pair as any made at his French Majesty's porcelain manufactory at Sèvres. She sighed and went down to her guests.

An unexpected one arrived during the evening. There was a thundering rat-tat-tat at the door that sent the wild echoes flying down the street, a mimic thunder proportioned to the rank of the guest. Could it—could

it?—her heart almost stopped beating and she trumped her partner's lead and never heeded the wrath in his eye. Steps on the stair, the man hired for the occasion throwing the door open with the fashionable bellow.

"His Lordship, the Earl of Essex!"

Indeed her heart fluttered scarcely less on this announcement as she rose, and Mr. Robinson, who was at home for a wonder, slouched behind her to meet the distinguished guest.

He had paid her the compliment of coming in a dress of extreme elegance—a lavender satin court suit embroidered in oak leaves and acorns of silver and silver-hilted sword, and was exceedingly gracious both to Mr. Robinson and Mr. Fox, who was taking a hand at cards extremely at his ease, with a bottle and glass at his side. The manners of the period, exceedingly ceremonious, possibly from being overstrained with standing on tip-toe, had a tendency to relapse very suddenly and surprisingly into the coarse and familiar, and with none more so than the famous Charles James Fox, and ladies who objected to this descent were forced to be extremely select in their society. Naturally Perdita could not set up this barrier, and herself fastidiously refined in her notions, she suffered very frequently from the opposite in her guests, and would sometimes make some blushing excuse to leave the room when a story came out painfully distasteful to her delicacy. There was nothing of this in Lord Essex. He took his place naturally and agreeably, but when Fox led the talk to a lady very notorious at the time and popped out an anecdote which set the men guffawing, he frowned and markedly diverted talk and thought into a new channel. This happened more than once, and she looked at him gratefully and with a sense of protection about her.

At last the Prince was spoken of, and then indeed he

had his opportunity. He spoke with delight of his accomplishments, his exquisite manners—"as polished as they are fascinating," he said with a meaning look at Mr. Fox lounging back in his chair with open shirt bosom and a stain of claret all down the front.

"He is the very Prince of good fellows," he continued, "laughter-loving, witty, amusing, but always the Prince behind the exquisite courtesy which endears him to all who have the happiness to approach him. Do I speak too strongly, Mr. Fox?"

"By no means, my Lord. His Royal Highness is all you say, and his talents are such that, with no disrespect to our present sovereign, I foresee a very happy and united England under his rule. He has a breadth of sentiment which even extends itself to admiration of the love of freedom displayed in the American Declaration of Independence. He has brains, not too common in his family."

"And a heart—a heart of gold!" interpolated Lord Essex, not without a side-glance at Perdita's listening eyes.

"Why, as to hearts—" said Fox. "Surely hearts went out of fashion with our last monarch. Can any one imagine the age of Mr. Walpole, of Dr. Johnson, of our frigid, rigid poets and their prim couplets with a heart? No—no— The women have hearts, happily for us, for it's to them only we must trust to excuse our imperfections. But a man—I won't grant his Royal Highness a heart—except indeed a manly fidelity to his friends, until I have seen him through his first love-affair."

"I guarantee his first to be his last!" retorted my Lord Essex. But Fox only burst into a loud guffaw and reminiscences of the last Prince of Wales so unedifying that Perdita sought the shelter of the window curtain where Lord Essex joined her.

It was a thrilling, vibrating conversation. First he dwelt on the elegant taste of her dress, which no one else had taken the trouble to remark, then on the beauty which set it off, then, alluding in passing to Mr. Robinson with a delicate cynicism which set him on the outer orbit of the planetary system, he drew his chair an inch nearer to hers and asked if he might have the honour of an interview next day for a purpose he was unable to explain at the moment. She agreed, all trembling, so dazzled that she did not know whether she did right or wrong, and with imploring eyes bid him avoid the subject, and they returned to the others. But the subject of the Prince could not be avoided, for all the world was talking of him at the moment. He was about to be set up in an establishment of his own, and the income to be allotted, the palace, the officers to be appointed, were a subject of immense popular interest. And so far he had won every heart, and the highest, most generous expectations were based upon the son of the whole nation. Litanies of praise resounded everywhere, and not least in Perdita's drawing-room where she sat, elate but shy, to hear and said never a word herself. She did not observe, so engrossed was she, that Mrs. Armstead was not in attendance for full fifteen minutes after she reached her room.

When Lord Essex came next day his manner was much more assured than on the first visit. He was gravely impressive as he drew a letter from his pocket, retaining it carefully in his hand.

"I must tell you, Madam, that his Royal Highness was deeply distressed and wounded by what I told him of the reception of his letter. I pass over the slur on my own honour in the supposition that I could forge my Master's name to a letter of such consequence—or to any. But the Prince's heart is eager and trusting and he values

those qualities in others. He has desired me therefore to convey another letter to you without any comment from myself, and begs you will consider it with compassion for his sufferings. And having placed it in your hands I will do myself the honour to bid you farewell and request permission to return at the same hour tomorrow for your reply. I need not tell you his Royal Highness risks much in this correspondence."

He bowed and retired, and was escorted down the stair by Mrs. Armstead, the hired footman not being on day duty. Perdita was alone with her letter.

She read it in such agitation that whether joy was mixed with it she could not tell. An ardent, yet respectful love-letter. Should he offend her chaste self-respect, there was no happiness for him in the future. If she could accord him a smile, the loneliness, the heavy duties of his position might be endurable. Not otherwise. The letter was short, but she knew that for one line in it many a woman would give, not only its weight in diamonds but the chance of her life's honour and happiness. She sat and dreamed over the palpitating words.

It is true that Mrs. Hannah More's voice was at her ear inculcating all the dangers that attend a first step on the slippery downward path, it urged wise saws and modern instances very well known to Perdita, who could not be on the stage and ignorant of the histories of many women past and present who graced the boards she trod so proudly. But which of them all could point to so dazzling a temptation as hers? And at the other ear was no solitary voice but a chorus reiterating the joys, the security, the safety of a position such as was offered her, where even the sneer would be silenced for the sake of the royal lover. Her husband—he would dare no interference even if, sunk in dissipation, he cared to resent what his own cruelty and negligence made almost inevitable.

Visions of the future crowded on her. Now she saw herself as a truer Pompadour exercising a virtuous influence over a young king, and felt it within her to be his faithful stay and counsellor in matters of state as in those of the heart. Sure she had talents that would open to admiration, given the opportunity, and, with the unalterable passion which she believed herself capable of inspiring, what might she not do for this royal lover who so generously threw his heart at her feet, and through him, for many? Would not this atone for the fall in chastity which imperilled her own soul only? And again she recalled Lord Essex's hint of the marriages of the Dukes, his uncles. Might not a true passion lead this ardent lover into a left-handed marriage—the love-resort of fettered Royalty? And if the offspring of such a marriage could not inherit, certainly he had many brothers to succeed him, if he should judge love worth the sacrifice. She entirely forgot Mr. Robinson in these gossamer dreams, and, with him, many other solid obstacles.

Again she read the letter. "My fate is in the hands of my Perdita; my life hers to preserve or ruin. Your Florizel."

There was a touch of poetry in that signature which raised it to her lips and bedewed it with her tears.

But why recapitulate? Are not these letters all written by the same quill from the wing of the God who laughs and flies, and are not the contending emotions they inspire the same also? In a word, Perdita thought and felt exactly what any beautiful woman of twenty eager and full of sensibility must think and feel when she has won the prize for which ninety-nine women out of a hundred would pawn their immortal souls,—the heart of a ruler of men.

But as yet she returned no answer. She trembled virginally on the edge of what must sweep her away either

to Paradise or Hell, and besides a horrid doubt assailed her whether he, so splendid, so highly placed, might not already have repented of his magnanimity of love. Suppose she wrote and the letter was returned silently or with scorn? How vast the gulf between them—how terribly apart he stood! How could she dare? And yet she feared to lose him by a coyness which might disgust the stooping conqueror. She sat that day and the next in a turmoil of agitation and at the playhouse many remarked her abstraction, and one, at least, among them, guessed the cause.

But the next day she lived again. My Lord Essex reappeared with another letter from his Royal Highness all fire and honey. He protested his agony of fear lest his adoration might offend so flawless a purity, and besought the lady, if she would not longer torture him, to be present that night at the performance of the Oratorio that he might by some private signal convince her of his love, and that he truly was the writer of the letters which until he had her approval he dared not sign otherwise than "Florizel."

"His Royal Highness is half distracted lest he should have offended you, Madam," cries my Lord. "Nobody is better aware than he of the unblemished correctness of your behaviour on the stage and in the great world. And such is his regard for you that nothing but a certain expression he caught in your beautiful eyes t'other night would have emboldened him for this declaration, believing it told him that he was not wholly indifferent to you and half promised compassion."

"His Royal Highness can't be indifferent to any of his subjects," panted Perdita, her colour coming and going. She knew best the meaning of her glances and could scarce deny it.

"That loyal affection he will always hope to deserve

and retain," replies Lord Essex gravely, "but Mrs. Robinson's sensibility will assure her that in the solitude of his great position he, more than other men, needs the love of a true woman to be his support, a bosom to which he can confide his inmost thoughts, a heart—"

"A wife—" Perdita faltered.

"Alas, Madam, what are royal marriages! Some day doubtless one will be proposed for him, but not for his own sake. 'Tis the nation makes the alliance, not he. He is but its representative. Her person, her disposition, may, probably will, be utterly repellent to him. What shall he do if there be not some good woman dear to his soul to make a true home for him, where his sensitive feelings may expand and his love meet with a faithful return? Envied by all, there are few men so solitary as he. But judge for yourself. Go, I beseech you, to the Oratorio to-night. Later meet him, hear his pleadings and form your own decision. But let your heart guide it."

Indeed Lord Essex pleaded so well for his master that had the lady been less engrossed 'twas the toss of a button that he might not plead his own cause as handsomely.

Was it possible to any woman—be her purpose what it might, to stay at home from that Oratorio? I dare swear there was not a prude in England but would have gone, if only to observe the course matters were taking. And then some little token of grace might cheer his young heart or soften the rejection which, possibly, she might be compelled to inflict.

Madam Diana herself, the inapproachable goddess of lunar chastity, is known to have bent in a silver curve above the happy mountain of Latmos, where slept her shepherd, Endymion, and to have imprinted a moonbeam kiss upon his lips. It did not so much as wake him according to some accounts, so who was a penny the worse?

And surely an Oratorio, grave music inspiring thoughts

of heaven, is an unimpeachable guarantee of good intentions! Perdita thought she might venture herself in precincts thus hallowed by St. Cecilia and accordingly did so. After all—to see—to judge for oneself—where is the harm?—and suppose her cruelty should break his heart? A responsibility to the whole nation appeared to her to weigh upon her slender shoulders. It was perhaps with this sense of responsibility that she chose for the occasion a dress the most elegantly genteel of her wardrobe, a white satin with silver tissue and palest pink and green feathers which gave her beauty the appearance altogether of a rose unfolding in delicate leafage the more so as excitement and agitation had given her a flush of the most attractive delicacy.

Here I will permit her to speak for herself. There was a time when she kept a brief sentimental record of the matter.

"I went to the Oratorio, and on taking my seat in the balcony box, the Prince almost instantaneously observed me. He held the printed bill before his face, and drew his hand across his forehead, still fixing his eyes on me. I was confused and knew not what to do. Still the Prince continued to make signs, such as moving his hand on the edge of the box as if writing, and speaking to his brother, the Duke of York (then Bishop of Osnaburg), who also looked towards me with marked attention. So marked was H.R.H.'s conduct that many of the audience observed it. Several persons in the pit directed their gaze at the place where I sat, and on the following day one of the diurnal prints observed that there was one passage in Dryden's 'Ode' which seemed particularly interesting to the Prince of Wales, who—

> " 'Gazed on the fair
> Who caused his care,
> And sighed and looked and sighed again.' "

So far Perdita, who, however, omits to tell us of another diurnal print which describes "the beautiful Mrs. R. who contrived so to *basilisk* a certain Heir Apparent that his fixed attention to the lovely object became generally noticed and soon after astonished their Majesties! The dart-dealing actress received a hint to withdraw which she complied with, though not without expressing the utmost chagrin."

Which account is true? Both and neither, says the observer of human nature, who may, however, own to a sympathy with their Majesties' alarm and their futile precautions. It is certain the charmer did not wholly discourage her adorer. She knew neither herself nor him as yet and floated on golden clouds of apotheosis, secure that she could return safely to earth when she pleased.

Here the moralist, pausing, must blame her severely. In the first place, she should not have attended the Oratorio. In the next she should not have noticed those flattering attentions. In the third she most certainly should have discouraged them with chilling reserve. In the fourth—for this is the corollary of the others,—she should not have been a woman. Being one,—consult the diurnal prints!

A few days later came a passionate request for a meeting, strengthened by the gift of a most beautiful miniature of the Royal lover. Never was an attractive face more attractively set forth than by Mr. Meyer's art, and within the handsome case was a heart cut in paper on which in a Princely hand was written on the one side:

"Je ne change qu'en mourant," and on the other, "Unalterable to my Perdita through life," the one language confirming the other in its fond asseveration.

It was then that with fears, doubts and joys indescribable, Perdita ventured to return a faintly encouraging answer to her enterprising wooer. Oh, the tremors, the

anxieties it caused her! Sheet after sheet of paper fluttered to the ground condemned for a word too much, an implication too little. Those few phrases were the labour of days, love's labour, and not lost, if one may judge by the delighted return. 'Twas a magic of wooing, it seemed that every circumstance of romance attended it, and day by day the pair became more beautiful in each other's eyes as the suspense prolonged itself. For Perdita insisted they must be known to each other by intimate interchange of thoughts before any meeting took place, and it was extremely difficult for any person to see how this meeting could be arranged, since the Prince, though soon to be set free from supervision and placed in an establishment of his own, was under the strictest watch and ward, and the rather because Queen Charlotte's eye had remarked Mrs. Robinson at the Oratorio with sternest disapproval—and she also was closely observed, but not by her husband. His devotion to drink, to cards, and the two latest sirens, proclaimed itself more loudly daily, and was plunging her into money alarms which would have half broken her heart but for her preoccupation. She heard on a side-wind that he had been threatened with an execution in the house, and that news reaching Sheridan he strongly advised her to place her jewellery and other little effects of value in his wife's charge, who had most kindly written to say she would be responsible for them. In the care of the silent and invaluable Mrs. Armstead they were sent to Great Queen Street, and in addition Mr. Robinson was informed that Sheridan was under the painful necessity of lowering Mrs. Robinson's salary for a time. He fortunately believed this and was filled with such righteous indignation that he threatened to call Mr. Sheridan out on the strength of it. Yet to all this Perdita could scarcely lend an ear.

The Prince pressed for a meeting and she had agreed. That was her world.

Every expedient was revolved. Would his Perdita meet him in the dress of "the Irish Widow"?—a part which she had played in the most becoming male attire—her figure in breeches fully justifying Mr. Garrick's prevision. Who then could suspect that the very modish spark was the dangerous lady of the dark eyes? That was but one of the expedients offered and instantly refused by her delicacy. He pelted her with daily letters.

Let the censor imagine what it was for a young woman in her position to know that the most admired Prince in Europe was devotedly attached to her. She was passionately sensitive to his powers of attraction and to his warm enthusiasm of adoration. That daily letter came to be the sunshine of her day. She saw his face from the stage or in Hyde Park with eager passionate eyes on her, and it became the very sunshine of a life not otherwise happy.

And the spring drew on with its soft languors, its blossoming hopes and beauty. The theatre was closed—her days and evenings were idle, except for the society at her house and elsewhere. And there his name was pre-eminent. The younger women in London cared for nothing so much as to talk of their Prince Charming, and Perdita listening unnoticed, knowing his heart was hers, warming a precious letter in her bosom, slipped softly, slowly into the moonlit deeps of such a seduction as few women were exposed to. One night when her guests were gone, all the women having talked themselves half amorous of a Prince whose delightful glance darted not only courtesy but admiration to every pretty face, she caught up her pen and wrote:

"I will meet you when and where you will. These

months have taught me all the delicacy and fidelity of your heart and mine responds to it. But, oh, I beseech you, consider before the thing is irrevocable. Consider the anger of your Royal parents. Consider the scandal to the nation if any hint of our meeting should be breathed. In such a case the man usually has nothing to lose, the woman all, but in your great position this is not so. Consider therefore, Sir, for yourself. And for me. If I forsake my husband and my profession I shall be entirely thrown upon your mercy and though I know your honour and could gladly trust to that, will not every temptation of beauty strive to lure you from me? Will not the people heap me with calumny and abuse? What—what if you should ever change to me? Oh, *that* I could not bear! Death—instant death would be my sole refuge. Once again I entreat you to judge for us both. Consider,—on my knees I beseech you."

So Perdita, in the high-flown language of her heart and of the time. In the manner of the time also she bedewed the words with tears, the large star-like splashes paled the ink here and there in a very touching manner and bespoke the agony of terror—the vertigo of fear which seized her poised on the brink of the irrevocable. She was, however, careful that they should fall on the paper rather than her handkerchief. Her dramatic instincts were as much nature as tuition.

The Prince, also in the manner of a time when the tear of sensibility bedewed every manly cheek at every event a little out of the ordinary, added his contribution to those of Perdita and in the same feeling manner moistened the paper of his reply—otherwise all joy and gratitude.

"And indeed, Madam," said Lord Essex, presenting it gravely, "I rejoice that you have come to a decision. I could not have been answerable for the consequence had this suspense and suffering to my Master been prolonged.

Yours has been a triumph of chastity. I doubt if there is another woman in the world who would have permitted such a lover to sigh so long in vain. You are at least certain of a heart tried and tested."

Perdita might have added, "By six months' endurance?" with a question mark. But the current was sweeping her away.

The way was found. Even Royal vigilance could not supervise all the moonlit acres of woodland and garden at Kew, and it was agreed that Lord Essex should row the shy beauty across the Thames to her lover's arms.

The arrangements concluded, my Lord paused and said slowly:

"And if you knew, Madam, what I suffer in doing this—if you could guess what my own growing agony has been in conducting negotiations for another—with whom no man dare compete—what I have suffered in seeing your perfections daily—"

But here my Lord Essex's eyes also were moistened with manly tears, which he hastily staunched with a lace handkerchief, and retreated, leaving Perdita pale and aghast at the power of her own irresistible charms. This last disclosure completed the alarms of her position. She could not wish herself less lovely, and yet—

CHAPTER XII

EDEN

On reflection, and considering the length of the coach drive which she must needs take with my Lord Essex to Brentford, Perdita decided that it was necessary Mrs. Armstead should accompany her. In justice to the Prince as well as herself it would be madness to risk her reputation with a declared admirer. She would not have chosen Mrs. Armstead, for her position made her intervention too much in the style of the comedy of intrigue to please her mistress, and there was also a quiet self-contained power about the woman which Perdita instinctively felt would outmatch her own impulsive flights if the two were tested. She did not know whether it covered thoughts friendly or unfriendly, almost feared to probe it, and yet in her sore need for a confidant was driven to test it, though deferring the risk until the last moment.

On the morning of the awful day therefore she sat before her glass while Mrs. Armstead, grave and reserved, brushed out the shining waves and curls of dark hair which so gloriously crowned her fair face. She noticed in the glass, and not for the first time, the beauty of the silky brown tendrils brushed back so demurely from Mrs. Armstead's white brow and the fine accurate shaping of her features, not strictly handsome but full of character and intelligence. It could only be fully admired by those whom intellect captivated—she was not everybody's money, as the saying runs, but Perdita had intellect enough herself to realize that any man or woman who did admire Mrs. Armstead would do so on grounds neither she nor they need be ashamed of.

Two or three times the words she wished to say died on her lips, but at last she got them out with what indifference she could muster—a poor pretence at the best, for she could see the colour flowing into her cheeks in the reflection before her.

"I am going down to Brentford to-day, Mrs. Armstead, and wish you to come with me."

"Yes, Madam. At what hour? By coach?"

"Certainly. I dine at the inn on the island between Brentford and Kew."

Her voice stumbled over the last word. All the world knew the King's country palace and that the Prince of Wales and Duke of York were living at Bonar Lodge, Kew, while the separate establishment was pending. It seemed to her that that one word told the whole story. But Mrs. Armstead's face in the glass was perfectly calm and indifferent.

"Do you make any stay, Madam? I ask that I may know what garments will be needed."

"I cannot tell my plans yet for certain. You had better bring what we shall want for a few days. And—"

"Yes, Madam?"

"My Lord Essex drives down with us. And—"

No, no. She could not bring herself to say more then. It must come later, but it should not be until it must. Who could tell what might happen to dash the painted bubble to mist? What had there ever been in her life to lead her to believe that happiness and prosperity were for her?

She said no more except to give a few directions which Mrs. Armstead received as though journeys to Brentford with his Lordship were an every-day occurrence. The coach was at the door at the time fixed, and the two women got in, the man having his orders to drive to Lord Essex's house in Dean Street, Mayfair.

Not a word could Perdita say. Mrs. Armstead sat with her clear sensible glance fixed on the crowded streets—eyes whose observation nothing escaped, lips which gave little passage to her thoughts. She respectfully made way for Lord Essex when he entered in his many-caped coat, the very latest travelling mode in cut and texture. His face of dismay when he saw her tickled her immensely in secret. She knew as well as Perdita how, with all devotion to his young Master's interests, he had counted on that charming *tête-à-tête* on the Brentford journey. But it was not to be and with all a courtier's tact he plunged into fifty other subjects until she recovered her composure.

They reached Brentford about four o'clock and a boat was ready to waft them to the inn on the island, a favourite resort for the better class of holiday makers, but empty so early in the season except for one pensive angler. Dinner was already ordered and after resting nominally—for agitation kept her in such a state of nervous excitement that she could neither sleep nor rest—she stood by the window and looked out. The sun was westering deliciously upon a long reach of the Thames, sinking in a soft radiance that filled the air with gold dust. On the water was a reflected dazzle which almost hurt the eyes, but there was a lovelier peace in the reedy shallows where the bulrushes stood over their own image shimmering beneath them. That quiet was heavenly. A longing pained her like a stab in the heart to share it—to have done with all the fever and fret, the pride, the fear, and lie beside that liquid tranquillity, dreaming the world away, beyond all its temptations. She knelt by the window and leaned out, bathing her tired spirit in the large splendour of earth and sky. How if she should send word to Lord Essex that she was ill,—that she could do no more? That she had resolved to

end the matter, that— But, no. What could she say! Life throws a thousand strands over one, each thread less perceptible than the spider's—each in itself breakable at will. But when the prisoner of life wakes and would rise and tear himself free the limbs of Hercules are powerless in the lightly woven mesh. She had no courage, no strength to return. It was like the passage through an enchanted wood; only the forward way lay open. The way back was choked with impenetrable growth.

But she knelt there till the last moment, embracing the wordless beauty with her own spirit. She had a heart easily touched to fine issues if too easily discouraged, an unhappy blend for the career she chose.

The great trees dipping their branches languidly in the shadowed water, the soft meadows golden and silvered with daisies and buttercups, moved her like faint exquisite music. These things had their secret—none could touch or hurt them. They lived in peace in a land she could not know. But, oh, that she might learn it! At that moment it seemed the only thing worth desiring.

A lonely pain possessed her—no one understood, no one cared. Yes—Sheridan once, long ago. But now he too had drifted as far away as that boat she saw receding into the sunset. The sun was sinking fast—the night was at hand, and change, change, terrible and inevitable, was upon her. What strength has human effort opposed to this? She dropped her head upon her hands.

Presently a quiet step came up beside her.

"His Lordship has sent me to say dinner is ready, Madam! Shall I arrange your hair?"

It was Mrs. Armstead, and in the shock and passion of the moment the poor Perdita caught her hand.

"Oh, Mrs. Armstead, I'm terribly alarmed. I need sympathy and help more than words can say. If I had the courage—"

But the other woman's calm checked her. She was as politely unresponsive as the wood of the mantelpiece—perfect in her duty to the last pin, but evidently and firmly resolved to be drawn into no responsibilities.

"You are shaken and tired with the journey, Madam. Permit me to bathe your eyes and put a little essence on your forehead. But I never saw you in better looks. Madame Duvernay has certainly exceeded herself in that Indian muslin gown. It becomes you to perfection. Do you go on the river after dinner? Will you have your black hat?"

It was the voice of the world breaking on a mood of heaven, but it caught and held Perdita. The other was effectually routed. She accepted all the attentions, decided on her satin cloak and hood, and went down the stair divested of every thought of appeal or refusal.

They were less than ever possible at the well-spread, well-served table, with the little glittering wine-glasses and the generous vintage which Lord Essex insisted she must sip. He was plainly but perfectly dressed for his work in a fine blue cloth, which set off his effeminate complexion and fair hair to perfection. Something of "the minikin finikin French powder-puff" about him on the surface, but a steel spring under it for all that,—a man to conceal his strength purposely in weakness for ends quite definitely seen by himself. He made not the faintest allusion to that past speech. It had been made and there it rested for use at some future time if needful. At present it was to be entirely ignored.

"You look a little pale, Madam," he said presently. "It is more than becoming as everything is with you. Yet let me remind you that his Royal Highness is young and full of joyous gaiety. The pensive strain pleases him as a minor chord in happy music. It must not be the theme. It must only embellish it. He is quickly

wearied of anything pensive except as a matter of sentiment."

This jarred upon her. Hitherto her world had considered what would be agreeable to her. It must be her study now to please another. Again she had the sensation of an iron hand closing softly but powerfully upon her. She tried to be gay.

"You have told me the Prince is my devoted admirer, my Lord. If so, may I not believe that I shall please him as nature made me—grave or gay?"

Lord Essex was sipping his claret, leaning back luxuriously in his chair.

"Undoubtedly, Madam, undoubtedly. Any man must feel it so. But may I point out that a Prince is a man plus his Princedom. It is another point of view from ours. A Prince may be a devoted lover as a Prince. Indeed with his Royal Highness his devotion is almost a madness. Yet—he is still a Prince, accustomed to be worshipped, courted, obeyed. The world arranges itself for a Prince. You will feel this instinctively. Your tact is too fine to permit me to doubt it."

The cold fear closed about her heart again. They had written daily—yes—but she had never spoken to the man to whose pity she was now to trust her all. Suppose she were but a passing lust, an incident. In his great life of splendour and power would love truly count for anything? But my Lord broke in again.

"I know I need not suggest the utmost discretion. You will find yourself courted by hundreds who have interests to make and favours to ask. Resolve at once that none shall find you use your influence in that way. It will injure your own position which should be— But I intrude—"

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, now thoroughly alarmed; "all you say is valuable. If you will but instruct me—

But not yet—not yet. He may not like me when we meet. I may not answer his hopes. The thing is not irrevocable yet. Indeed—indeed it is not."

Looking at her, he understood her high-strung nature and the momentary deep repugnance to the part she was called upon to play. To him it seemed a small matter—except for the power and influence it opened up, but he saw very well it was no gay coquettish trifle to her and liked her the better for it. He turned the talk resolutely, and when dinner was done, and a soft dusk with the hint of a young moon on the river reaches, he pushed his plate aside.

"Now I shall fetch your cloak and row you awhile up the river where we will watch for the signal from the Kew bank. It will compose your spirits."

He was wise in silence, and helping her into the boat with a cloak about her and the hood shading her face, he set himself to the sculls and with long smooth strokes pulled her up the dreaming river. Not a sound but the liquid ripple and a distant nightingale singing in the Kew beeches.

Words cannot describe the strangeness of her feelings. When she stepped into that boat by the river-side it seemed to her that she had broken entirely with her old life. She saw it receding, drifting away with the bank they had left, becoming misty and indistinct. Had she ever been a part of it? Should she ever be again? And a voice in her heart answered—Never.

The daylight faded mysteriously,—the lights of the little houses twinkled remote. A vast peace possessed earth and sky. Suddenly—it seemed after a long interval he spoke.

"The signal!" and turning the boat's head, pulled downward and to the Kew bank. She looked and saw a hand-

kerchief fluttering among the trees by the great iron gates.

As the bow grated and Lord Essex, springing out, lifted her to earth, nothing was to be seen in the blackness of the shadows. Suddenly two men emerged, young, straight, tall, the foremost of the two with eager hands extended. She moved forward in a dream, clutching Lord Essex's arm.

"Your Royal Highness, I have the honour to present Mrs. Robinson!"

She heard that—she heard some words from the others, but then he and Lord Essex had vanished mysteriously away, and a strong arm was about her waist, a glowing cheek pressed to hers.

"Perdita, my heart's love, my angel, my adored. You have braved so much for me. You shall never regret it—never. A life's adoration is too little to repay it."

She clung to him in a terror of joy—the only real thing left in all her vanishing world—young, passionately beautiful and her own. Oh, golden moment—the one sure foretaste of heaven! Yet a foretaste only, for the dark river ancient with its knowledge of passing love and certain death and sad forgotten things flowed silently beside them.

CHAPTER XIII

HEAVEN AND EARTH

His letters had charmed her—"those eloquent letters," as she called them—"the exquisite sensibility which breathed in every line, his ardent professions"—how could any heart resist them? But what were even they to the young man himself? He was infinitely more attractive. Hear her again, "The graces of his person, the irresistible sweetness of his smile, the tenderness of his melodious yet manly voice will be remembered by me until every vision of this changing scene is forgotten."

Small wonder she sentimentalizes. It is universally agreed that in all the world at that time was no Prince so accomplished. The mind leaped centuries backward and beheld Prince Hal and Harry Hotspur in considering him.

What was there this beautiful youth could not shine in if he would? His graceful manners had none of the *froideur* of his family. He greeted none with their

> "Broad illustrious glare
> That shines so flat in every eye,
> And makes them all to stare,"

to the abasement of loyal subjects. On the surface, all quick bright impulse, brilliant, with gifts to attract the people as well as their masters. A good shot, a fine rider, an exquisite dancer, the women were mad for him, the men enthusiastic. He had been well educated, and enough of it stuck to enable him to hold his own in any society

but that of pedants, and there he was unlikely to be found. There was nothing that the most critical could despise and blossoming graces that all the world must admire. He evoked the loyalty which his father George the Third with all his homely virtues had never secured. In him, for the first time, the heavy Hanoverian stock sparkled and took on a tinge of French gaiety very much at issue with its origins. Was it a throwback to the strain of Stuart blood which connected him with the beautiful Monmouth, the witty Charles the Second—the world's enchantress, Mary Stuart? No one could tell. They speculated.

If he loved to be in the public eye—that surely was more royal than to closet oneself at Kew and be plain "Farmer George" with a dowdy German Charlotte. If he yearned for freedom, expense, dash, glitter—surely a young man in his position must do the like. There were and would be, for a while, excuses for any madcap pranks he chose to amuse himself with. He was the nation's spoilt child in an age which took an early crop of wild oats as a virtue, and was all for Charles Surface provided he carried his vices with a dash and a flourish.

He doted on Perdita, and to her he appeared more than human—so easily did all his splendours sit upon him, so unconstrained and unaffected was he in all their intercourse. Essex's warnings were forgotten. Difficult to please? Not he. He delighted in her whims, her little coy retreats, and joined in her sentimentalities with a zest which to her mind united them for eternity.

A rose, moonlight, a nightingale, the river, her eyes,—their passion,—each and every one was a text for sentiment of the most luscious. He wrote royal verses:

> "Oh, my Perdita, take this rose
> And hide it in thy snowy breast."

And so forth, and she replied in strains of honeyed passion tempered by the taste of the period—

> "Power and splendour cannot charm me,
> I no joy in wealth can see—"

where "charm me" will inevitably rhyme with "alarm me" and the whole wind up with "the fear of losing thee."

But that was the last fear which troubled her. She would not have hinted it if it had. No, his heart was "unalterably hers"—in his own beloved words.

No day was endurable to either when they did not meet, and as the playhouse was closed she was free to choose her own hours and his.

Therefore this young party of four people, all much of an age, met frequently in the delicious shades of Kew and when they thought themselves out of earshot of the staid Royal dwellers they became so adventurous as to indulge in music—Perdita breathing her soul to the moonlight like the nightingale, and the Prince supporting her. "He sang with exquisite taste," says she, "and the tones of his voice breaking on the silence of the night have often appeared to my entranced senses like more than mortal melody. Often have I lamented the distance which destiny had placed between us. How would my soul have idolized such a husband! Often have I formed the wish that that being were mine alone to whom partial millions were to look up for protection."

Ardent! Yet how shall we disentangle the feelings inspired by the Prince and the man? It is known of the sex that the mere distance of an object inspires the desire to possess it to the exclusion of all others. And this object was in itself not only superlatively attractive, but the apple offered in his hand was of purest gold and set with more diamonds than any Paris offered to the un-

veiled goddesses. She was not mercenary, no!—witness the Duke of Cumberland and many more! but that diamonds enhance gold is a truth that cannot be forgot nor blamed by any student of human nature with all its mixtures and self-deceits.

And while these nightingales were rendering vocal the groves of Kew, good King George and Queen Charlotte in sedate connubial security sat within the not far distant walls and read their favourite divines in blissful unconsciousness that the far distant sounds of melody they might catch were not harmless revellers on the Thames, fleeting the hours with music, but the Heir Apparent with Mrs. Robinson and encouraged by the Duke of York and my Lord Essex, breathing his passion to the moon in numbers which they would have wholly disapproved, apart from the company—which would have raised the very hair on their august heads.

It is indicative of much, that whatever Mr. Sheridan might suspect (and indeed he did, and the world shared not by any means the ignorance of their Majesties) he received no confidences from Perdita. That spring was dried up for the present, and whether he regretted it or no, he made no sign, but bided what he believed to be the inevitable moment.

Grave considerations now loomed on the horizon. The Prince was placed in control of his own establishment, and was no longer under formal supervision. His attachment to Perdita increased daily and the question for them both was how far could her position be defined.

It was broached one evening at Kew when they sat beneath the great trees reflecting their glorious foliage in the waters of the Thames that rippled at their feet. The sun was sinking amid rosy clouds and the harmless fire burned in the dark and bulrushed reaches of the river. Indeed the river runs through this part of their story

like a grave melody. They met there at all seasons—in the bright dawn when a chill freshness rose from it like the breath of a woodland god and all the ferns and mosses were a-glitter with dew. There, beneath the immemorial trees she waited, a slender Dryad leaning against the silver-grey trunk as though she might vanish in a quiver of green leaves and flow away liquid with the ever-flowing ripple and be gone, or in the flitting of the owls with great clouds veiling and disclosing the moon—the deep night odour of the trees filling her with a dreamy voluptuous delight. And then a soft fluting whistle—a step brushing eagerly through the long grasses and the opening boughs, and there was the young Apollo, the moon on his bright eager eyes, running, hurrying to his delight.

Days marvellous, never to be forgotten. There was at all events one Empire which, happen what would, she could never lose. She was a part of his youth. When he remembered that youth in days far and incredible as yet, he must remember her also and those dawns and darks divine by the river.

The Duke of York and Lord Essex sat a little way off and out of sight discussing Newmarket and horses, but their voices could be heard mellowed by distance, though not their words.

Her cheek leaned against his shoulder as he looked down at her with a passion inexpressible in words. Indeed at this time he loved her with every ardour of which he was capable. His every word and look revealed it, and if there were limits they were below the horizon.

"My Perdita must surely come to a resolution soon," said he. "We can't delay. The scenes at the theatre are what I cannot and will not endure for my beloved. Insolent curiosity! I would have struck every man dead there if I could, even the first time I saw you, and *now*

unbearable! And we shall meet more happily when you have your own establishment. You have had time to consider, angel of my soul, and I wait your decision."

She clung to his hand in replying.

"I am so full of fears. My very soul trembles at so momentous a change. To give up my art—my home. Oh, what shall I be then?"

"The worshipped and adored of a man who is able and willing to protect the woman who trusts him. Your incessant fears are almost a reflection on me, Perdita."

There was a pique in his tone that alarmed her. Indeed the subject had often been discussed before, and it had always returned to her fears and indecision.

"What is it alarms you?" he insisted, still in the same tone. "It can't be the revenue you give up at the theatre, for I shall naturally provide for every expense, and you know you have my bond for £20,000 on my coming of age which, apart from my love for you, surely provides for all events. If you fear my love may change I can only repeat, 'Unalterable to my Perdita through life.' I know my own heart and its tender fidelity. Yours appears more doubtful. Is it that you object to leave your husband? If so—" He withdrew his hand and his eyes and looked moodily at the dimpling river. Quick terror seized her. If he, her Prince, her lover, were to be offended, all indeed would be lost.

"Adored of my soul!" she whispered. "Do not wound me by such talk. Money? When did I ever value it? Your love, your love, is all I prize in this wide world. Oh, continue it to me, and there is nothing I will not risk for your beloved sake. But why I hesitate,—what reason can I have but my own unworthiness? When I think of all the beauties who will crowd about you for a look, what hope have I to retain your heart through all the long years? Yet, if you leave me, death is my only prayer."

"What more can I do than protest and vow that the years to come shall show my fidelity! And if I've protested it once I've done it a thousand times. Why so exacting, Perdita? Is all the trust—all the risk to be on my side? You know what I have risked in meeting you here."

If the poor fond wretch had preserved a remnant of wisdom she might have weighed the risks thus. On his side a reprimand. The King himself could venture no more. On hers, her career, her good fame, all possibility of a reclaimed husband and home, the very bread she ate,—all flung into the gamble for a young man's heart exposed to ruinous temptation and trials, whom she herself had proved inflammable as tinder. But how could she be wise? Already she had adventured so far that now her terror was lest the adorable despot in whose hands she had placed her all should be offended with his slave. It was in that moment she first understood that Essex was right. She must not so much as hint at any will of her own nor any faintest hesitation at obedience where her lover was concerned. Always he must be the King Cophetua and she the beggar maid, if there were to be any hope of climbing above the lowest step of the throne. Henceforward it must be her anxious study to strengthen every bond, yet give them the semblance of a garland of thornless roses, all sweetness and perfume, the soft fetters of love—and love alone.

"Beloved, you shall decide my every motion," she said with earnest fondness. "Your will is mine. I take it extreme good of you to be so solicitous for me. What would you have me do?"

He kissed her for her sweet submission, the little cloud of ill-humour quite dissipated, and it was resolved that the house in Cork Street already mentioned between them should at once be secured for her and information be given

to Sheridan next day of her intention to quit the stage almost instantly. To all he proposed she hurriedly agreed. Not again would she risk that cloud on his brow. He must find her all yielding softness if she hoped to preserve any influence with him. How could it be otherwise with the Royal blood which brooks no constraint? Pride in his position made her the more his daily, it was joy to be his slave. He made ample amends after this for the little spurt of temper, placing on her finger a diamond in witness of his truth.

"Our wedding ring!" he said fondly. "And who can tell, my Perdita, that fate may not open up some possibility of a private legal bond whatever it may be in public. My uncle Cumberland has married the woman of his heart and—"

She started so suddenly at that detested name that he felt the thrill in the hand he held and clasped it the more tenderly.

"The very thought overjoys my treasure. I know!—my own heart throbs to it!"

And so forth, mere lovers' raptures, sweet in the soft twilight, sweet in the tremulous rising of the young moon in a saffron sky, her delicate lights and shadows quivering in the still pools at their feet. Not more surely was the swift river flowing to the sea than Perdita's life was passing from the known to the unknown. She clung to him trembling.

In a little while all was settled. Sheridan, on her visiting him in his office at the theatre, took the notice in chilly silence at first. It struck him both in pride and pocket—heavily in both. The relations between himself and Perdita had been peculiar, and, to him as to her, touching. Now she was drifting to a sphere where though they might meet by the Prince's favour it could never be as heretofore, and distance and time would divide them

soon irrevocably. And on the money side it was serious also; her romantic languishing playing and the mere hint of her connection with the Prince filling the house to suffocation. He heard her to the end, and then, bowing, said coolly that he would not feign ignorance of her intentions and wished her better than he augured in the decision he must be aware she had made. He rose though she was still seated and appeared to intimate that the interview might now well end.

Her feelings would not, however, admit of such a parting. She also rose, leaning her hand on the table for support, her heart almost choking her utterance. It seemed the end to all the certainties of life, summed up and represented in the man before her. Wounded friendship spoke in his cold averted looks—justly wounded, as she felt in that most painful moment, for it appeared to her that she had taken its gifts too lightly. Genius and love placed at her service had raised her to the position she now occupied, and yet when a glittering temptation allured her, without a word of regret she appeared to slight him for one of whom she knew little more than the dazzling height to which he could never raise her, do what he would.

"Mr. Sheridan," she said, pressing her other hand to her throbbing bosom, "I appear ungrateful and yet, God knows, am so moved at this moment with gratitude and sorrow that I scarce dare speak lest I give way altogether. Believe me, wherever fate leads the poor Perdita she will carry with her the gratefulest, tenderest memory of your unexampled goodness. What do I not owe to it? Oh, Sir, I beseech you be not so unrelenting." She could say no more, but every eloquent line of her face and drooping figure pleaded for a word of reassuring kindness.

He indeed was but too accessible to the tenderer feel-

ings; with him the impression was always as strong as it was transitory, and now his brow cleared a little as he regarded her, but still coldly:

"Pray, Madam, how came you to think me so unrelenting? I am not made of ice, and a woman's sensibility always finds its mark in me. You know also that I had a warmer feeling than friendship for you once—why should I deny it? But at your will I controlled it, and—"

"Is it wholly dead?" she questioned, looking piteously at him.

"Why, what a question when you are just about to throw yourself into another man's arms! What does it concern you, Madam, what I feel? or what I shall feel? Indeed you shall not know! Suppose it a mere Platonic interest, standing like the blank leaves between the Old and New Testament,—a virgin page, and we know not how Time may inscribe it. To sum up, you leave us and take your own way. Is there more to say than farewell? 'Tis hardly a course on which I can bid God speed you?"

"No, indeed," says she, scarce audibly. "But if your now cool interest will permit, oh, counsel me, Mr. Sheridan! I am little over twenty—you know the world and I know nothing except that the way I go is beset with dangers and will make every woman and most men my enemies. Can I yet turn back?"

"Gad's life, Madam, I wonder who but you would ask counsel of one man with another in hand!"

She caught the changed word quick as lightning and played for her advantage womanfully.

"From one lover about another! Ah, Mr. Sheridan, than I shall force you to answer. Let me recall your own words—'I will not covet you henceforward,' you said. Then you love me truly and the love that does not covet is unselfish in its very essence, and to that I appeal.

Counsel me, guide me, for I feel the ground heaving under my very feet and am distracted with anxiety. Oh, my friend—my friend!"

It will be allowed this was moving. His brow softened into a melancholy kindness.

"Be seated, Madam, and calm. We are not now on the boards. If you wish my counsel you must be frank. Do you love the man or merely the glitter and romance that surround the Prince?"

His eyes pierced her like rapiers as he put the question she herself had never solved. She faltered and hesitated. He laughed with studied bitterness.

"Oh, I know, Madam,—'tis all magic now. To be the adored of the most desired man in the world, flattered, caressed, envied,—money and jewels in glittering heaps at your feet! Yet you *might* love him in spite of this. Do you so?"

She put her hands to her face and he could see through the slender fingers the bright blood flow and ebb in her cheeks.

"I—I don't know, Sir." Indeed, she shamed to confess her passion.

"Then I do!" he cried, exulting. "You don't love him. You love the surrounding circumstances. *Now* I can counsel you coldly and wisely, for your heart can't be wounded by what I say. It stands thus. You can scarcely retreat now. The matter has gone too far, if I judge right. You stand committed?"

"I stand committed," she murmured.

"Then we treat it as a matter of business. To be candid with you, Madam, my reading and experience convinces me that to be any man's mistress is a difficult position for a woman of breeding, sensibility and brains, and you, unluckily for yourself, have all three. It takes a woman coarse in grain to suit herself to that position

and escape misery. And to be a King's mistress—and this man may be King any day—is to multiply that difficulty a million-fold. What! You are entering on a life of intrigues, and fears, and dangers indescribable. I would not dwell on this if your heart were engaged, but since it is not, I will speak candidly that you may have the less to regret when the inevitable overtakes you. A man in his position can't be faithful. How should he with all the finest women in the world kneeling to catch the handkerchief he throws? He is the Grand Bashaw and can't help himself. I own your attractions great, but ask yourself, Are not others a match for you? If you are not prepared to hold him later by the complaisances of the Du Barry, your star must set. Therefore, take the needful precautions before you burn all your boats."

He paused a moment. She felt the contempt that underlay his easy manner, and dared not look up. It was the first taste of the avalanche of scorn to come and was chill as death. The prediction also. She shuddered as she heard.

"The first precaution must be obvious. A house and settlement. When the Prince's fancy changes—"

"I could return to the stage, and would, that moment!" she cried. "I'll be indebted to no man—"

"Don't count on that, Madam, the people have never loved a Royal mistress. Not for the vice's sake! God knows the people run the nobility hard in that race, and I declare I can't name the winner. Simply because they object to be plundered for the upkeep of these costly iniquities. I recall but one exception—Nell Gwynne, and she herself was of the people. They envied and admired her success as one of themselves climbing the ladder. You have not the recommendation of low birth, and I fear the stage would be closed to you. But what matter if a settlement is secured!"

She braved his contempt and said faintly:

"The word of a Prince—I have his bond—"

He interrupted, laughing without gaiety.

"The bond of a man under age! The word of a Prince! You recall the Psalmist whose trade taught him something of Princes. 'Put not your trust—' No, Madam, get a sound lawyer to act for you, and bind the lover in fetters of red tape as well as in roses. 'Tis the soundest advice I can give you! A Prince may bubble you as well as another."

"Present him with a lawyer's bill! Oh, Mr. Sheridan, you degrade me to the dust. You can think this of me? I should die of shame!"

"Better that than of hunger, Madam. Have you never seen the play 'Jane Shore'?"

"His anger, his disgust, would annihilate me. And justly."

"Then let the matter be opened through Lord Essex who was ambassador between the high contracting parties."

She gathered up her resolution and faced him quaking.

"Even from you I can't bear this. It insults me though you don't mean it so."

Did he not mean it so? Was there no revenge for past thwarting? Let every man judge for himself. He proceeded however.

"I am silent, Madam, at your bidding. There is only one other consideration I would urge. I hear the Prince was seen yesterday driving in the Park with the Duchess of Cumberland, his aunt—Heaven save the mark!—by marriage. A bad conjunction of stars for you or any decent person. I counsel you to keep your lover from the Cumberlands. Spare no art or wile for that purpose."

"But why?" she asked, her eyes distended with the fear that name always brought her.

"Consider, Madam. The Duke is as bad a man as disgraces not only his rank but the earth. He has two deep grudges—nay, three—to satisfy. First, their Majesties have slighted him and his Luttrell Duchess with a resolute indignation that has roused all his brutal resentment. This is talked of everywhere and could he gain the Prince and pierce their hearts 'twould be a vengeance to delight him. Second, you slighted His Royal Highness's advance with a scorn he has not forgotten. Third, did ever a Prince of the Blood not view the man who stands higher than himself but with malice and jealousy? Heed this warning, and dread the name of Cumberland as you do the devil. And now, Madam, my bolt is shot. I have spoke my mind. All is said, and probably in vain."

She met him now with a face struggling for self-command, and barely achieving it.

"I thank you, dear Mr. Sheridan, for that last warning, though I can't for the first. 'Tis most true, and what I can do I will. And when I'm a broken, ruined woman I'll come to you and thank you for the wisdom that showed me my dangers too late to escape them."

"Too late!" he echoed. "The saddest words in any tongue! Well, child, farewell, for though you play a few nights more we shall not meet alone."

He paused, looking down a moment, then added:

"Has the Prince told you that he desired I should be presented to him? We have met through the agency of Mr. Fox. The Prince admires my plays, it seems. He loves a cheerful companion, and on that score Mr. Fox could vouch for my gaiety. It seems his Royal Highness aspires to be a prince of good fellows as well as—"

But he halted there. The time was not ripe for Perdita or any other woman to hear the plans that Fox's subtle brain was forming for the Prince's political emancipation with himself as Vizier. And Sheridan? There also Fox's

intention was fixed. Those brilliant talents were not to be left for the stick-in-the-mud Tories of the King's party to gather to rejuvenate their faded graces. Sheridan indeed had the true Irish gust for politics, triumphs, shifts, deceits and all. The gambler's love of the greatest gamble on earth, the fatal fluency that would talk the hind leg off a donkey with flights of eloquence exaggerative, flamboyant, invoking all the gods and virtues on a mere matter of red tape and sealing wax. In short, the Irishman raised to the ninth power, and Fox knew him, in all his adaptabilities and gay insincerities, the very man he needed to hold the Prince in hand while he himself went deeper. But of this there was nothing on the surface. What more natural than that the Prince should gather a sparkling company of the first men and women of the day about him in his new abode? It was to be a crowded milky way of all the starriest beauties—the lovely Duchess of Devonshire known already to Perdita, but now to be known no more, the exquisite Mrs. Crewe, to whom Sheridan had dedicated "The School for Scandal," known to all the poets and wits as Amoret, from a sweet seductiveness that none other could equal. And many more. All these things were in Sheridan's knowledge but not in Perdita's, as he cut short the revealing word.

"It seems we shall meet then," she said tremulously. "I scarcely know whether I am glad or frightened. Life has grown so strange, so unreal to me—"

"You will do me the justice to remember I warned you."

"I know—I know. Whatever happens I can blame no one but myself—and my husband."

Another pause, then in a breathless flutter scarcely audible:

"Mr. Sheridan, your wife must hear of this. May I implore you to tell her I am no frivolous bad woman.

Bad I may be—but—I have suffered. Will you remind her of this? Of my home life. Of—"

"Certainly I may promise so much, for I know it to be the truth. But you are aware—"

She cut him short almost in an agony.

"Don't say it—don't say it: Did I ask to see her? But tell her I love her and can't forget her sweet kindness."

He was moved, but what were words in so strange a situation? Had he known it, the tide of the river rolling irresistibly to the sea had caught him also as well as the woman trembling before him. He too had ventured on the brink, allured by the dancing golden ripples, and the suddenly shelving shore had launched him into the deeps. One needs be a strong swimmer to keep pace with a Prince to be so fatal to so many.

They stood looking at one another a moment—her great eyes searching his face for a love she had rejected, a compassion that if shown would have broken her. A very woman, running her own heart on the sword.

"Poor little earthenware pot that must needs swim down the stream with the big iron pots!" says he. "The poor Perdita! Well, be happy and forgetful. You can scarce be the one without the other."

She caught his hand and wrung it in silence, then went out, he following, his hat under his arm, down the empty green room.

"Madam, permit me to escort you to your chair," he said with the most distinct politeness.

He stood and watched as it bore her away.

CHAPTER XIV

PRINCE CHARMING

When Sheridan went home that night there was a cloud upon him that Elizabeth was quick to see. The last months had been anxious ones for her in spite of money flowing in at the theatre, and it might seem a hard fate that immediately the one anxiety was allayed others should rear their heads. She could not hide from herself that it was no easy matter to live with him. The charming Irish ease and gaiety which had first warmed her girl's fancy stood the test of everyday life no better than a butterfly with its wings draggled in a thunderstorm. If he could have been sheltered from every care, provided with an unlimited balance at his banker's, would things have been much better? Once she would have answered yes. Now she doubted. She began to realize that across the jewel of his intellect ran some fatal flaw of character. He began, but could not finish, saw but could not achieve, desired but could not attain, save in the uncontrollable uplift of some strange intermittent force in him for which he seemed no more accountable than as if it were an outside and not a personal impulse.

Elizabeth could not write his plays, but there was much else she could relieve him of and she set patiently to work on the theatre accounts and affairs, disentangling—so far as human effort could do it—allotting and suggesting. She shouldered the unthankful task of reading the plays sent in for consideration, and they were many, for men wrote plays then as the nearest, least expensive avenue to fame and competence. Indeed Sheridan's own success

had brought a thousand diluted Charles Surfaces raining about her own devoted head. It was his business to read them, but for all he cared they lay unopened until the dust gathered on them and the playwrights were raving like tragedy kings about Drury Lane. Then Elizabeth would sift them, balance, reject or accept. He relied on her judgment. Her own experience as a professional singer helped her, and she was contriving some sort of order out of disorder, planning future engagements of players,—all the miscellaneous work which Sheridan neglected and no one else could do efficiently. She sat with a pile of papers before her in the study when he came in between twelve and one o'clock, and lifted wearied hazel eyes which bid for a smile through all their weariness. He threw himself into a chair and she pushed the papers aside and pulled a low stool beside him, looking up silently. He did not speak and presently she ventured a question.

"Anything wrong, Chéri? Yes, I know there is. Tell me."

"Damnably wrong! Just as matters were looking up at the theatre and I was hoping that what with 'The School'—and the big audiences and one thing or another it would be plain sailing, in comes Perdita to cut her connection with us. Damned ungrateful slut. Garrick and I made her, and here she gives me the go-by and throws me off as light as a last season's gown. As she happens to be the mode just now—"

"Oh, but she can't, she shan't. It isn't like her. I'll speak to her, Chéri. Leave it to me. Don't vex yourself about it. I know I can move her."

"You'll neither see her nor speak to her."

He said no more—and she looked up quickly, then down, following her own thoughts. Of course she had heard rumours, but hers was a mind slow to condemn a friend, quicker to see the good than the ill. Rumours? Whom

did they spare? She kept silence, he watching her face sidelong, as every thought flitted over its transparence. Presently she said very softly:

"I don't believe it. No—I don't. She never would—Never. She's not a— No."

"She is a— Yes! If you mean by that a little fie-fie—a baggage. She throws us over for the Prince. I don't make any parade of morals, God knows, and though I may think her a damn fool it's none of my affair. It's who to secure in her place troubles me. She had a sentimental long-eyelashed way of playing certain parts which took that gudgeon, the public, as if they were all amorous young fellows of twenty. And in breeches parts— Well, damn me if I waste another thought on her. Try to think of a successor, Betsy."

But she was lost in thought. Presently she floated up to the surface wistful-eyed.

"I'm sorry. But why do you think her a fool?"

"Why? Consider his position. If it's hard for most men to be faithful to one woman, it's impossible for him. And his bringing up. If their Majesties had wanted to drive him to the devil when he was let loose they couldn't have plotted it better. A saint couldn't hold straight in his situation."

"But, Chéri, if you think that," she said timidly, "is it wise to encourage intimacy with him? If you think the poor Perdita foolish because she trusts him, is it safe to be his friend?"

He laughed scornfully, shrugging his shoulders with the half French gesture peculiar to him.

"I think I have enough judgment to keep clear of the perils, my dear. And, unlike Perdita, I have not the misfortune to be a woman. His Royal Highness is going to be useful to his humble servant. He doesn't know his happiness yet, but he is."

"We need it," she said with a sigh. "I've been looking through the accounts and however much money the theatre makes none seems to come in or stay with us. It's debt, debt, debt! We never get clear of it. But I can't think of that now. Perdita—"

She was interrupted by a thundering knock at the hall-door which appeared to shake the whole house. The servants had gone to bed, for it was long past twelve o'clock. Sheridan jumped up.

"God send the theatre's not on fire!" he said and ran down the stairs. Elizabeth stood with her hand on the table, waiting nervously.

Quick steps, light voices coming up. Sheridan's, then a strange one, then another.

The door thrown wide, her husband holding it respectfully open.

"His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales. Mrs. Sheridan, Sir!"

Astonished almost beyond composure, she came forward and curtseyed,—she could not do anything ungracefully, her beautiful long limbs and small perfectly set head were rhythm in themselves as lovely a music as the sweet voice which seemed only another expression of them. The Prince looked at her in boyish admiration.

She was all in flowing white, a lace *fichu* crossed over her slender bosom, and ruffles at the elbows. Dark clouds of hair shadowed her pale face and soft eyes. But her starry charm was in something beyond these and could not be told in words. Distinction was a part of it, tenderness, sweetness, a spiritual purity. The world knew Sheridan's wife was beautiful, the Prince had heard it from Perdita, but as always she differed from his expectations and surpassed them.

"Mr. Fox, Madam," he said, indicating the famous Charles, in a slovenly stained coat of plum-colour laced

with tarnished silver, who stood bowing behind him. "And neither he nor I deserve pardon for disturbing you at this unconscionable hour. I don't know myself where we found courage if it was not in the bottle. The truth is your husband was spoken of, and to be honest, I delight in his company, and so I said—'Come along, Charles, to Great Queen Street, and let's crack a bottle with him. Mrs. Sheridan will be asleep and dreaming of the angels and—'"

Sheridan's clear laugh cut across Elizabeth's doubtful smile.

"And here we are, Sir—entertaining angels unawares. The bottle shall be forthcoming, and Mrs. Sheridan is highly honoured indeed."

The Prince bowed charmingly—his bow was celebrated already. With women it clinched the homage his eyes implied on the smallest encouragement.

"Now I shall tell my real motive," says he. "'Twas to have the happiness to meet Mrs. Sheridan of whose voice and beauty all the world is the lover. Why, Madam, no later than yesterday I was at Kew and my father and mother spoke of you. The Queen said that when she first heard you, Madam, in Oratorio that you rose to her notion of a seraph singing before the Throne and she forgot her snuff-box to the end of the five hours' concert, and his Majesty added; 'Ay, ay—angelic voice, hey? What! What! And a face— Well, best not talk of pretty faces before the Queen. Not good for us! What! What!'"

He gave such a droll imitation of both his royal parents that Elizabeth, though half frightened at his audacity, could not help laughing and Fox and Sheridan roared. He went on gaily.

"Oh, Madam, I don't exaggerate. Rat me if I do. Old Horace Walpole declared to the Duchess of Devonshire that your beauty was in the superlative degree and

that he saw with his own eyes the King admire and ogle you as much as he dared in so holy a place as the Oratorio, though Saint Cecilia deigned no response. So can you wonder I couldn't stay away? What could move my father—"

He threw a gay glance at her which she returned. This splendid fair-headed young man in his damask velvet and silver lace was a fine flower indeed for any lady's liking, and the artist in Elizabeth took pleasure in his beauty, and the woman in his easy flattery. Sheridan stood by, gloating. He had never so admired his lovely wife as when he saw her through princely eyes.

The Prince dropped lightly on one knee before her.

"Madam, Madam, a petition. First that I may hear you sing. I am rooted to the carpet until you consent. Second— No, no,—don't refuse. It is not too late. It won't wake the neighbours. They will merely think it angels choiring in their dreams. Yes—good! and the second clause of the petition—and here I am furthered by the Duchess of Devonshire and Mrs. Crewe—is that you will occasionally give us a *soirée* here, where the fashionable world may not only hear your voice, but have the happiness to meet your husband, who is to be one of the most distinguished men of my Court at Carlton House."

The latter sentence held Elizabeth. The first frightened her. What? *Soirées* in their modest home—the racket of the fashionable world thundering, knocking at their door! The cost—the wine, the dress for Chéri and herself—a hundred frightened thoughts jostled in her brain as she pressed herself back against the harpsichord, half flying the temptation offered by the splendid young Prince before her.

He still knelt on one knee, laughing and looking up into her eyes with that young candour which it was so

easy to take for transparent truth. "She won't listen!" he said. "Charles, speak for me!"

"No, no, Sir. No one need speak for you!" she cried, catching gaiety from him. "Pray don't kneel. I am not sure the carpet was swept this morning." (She laughed outright with sweet sparkling eyes.) "Indeed I will sing, and as for the *soirées*— But I have lost the habit of singing for a crowd."

He was up in a moment and leading her to the harpsichord—all deference and grace. Might it be a song from her husband's "Duenna."

He hung over her enraptured while she began the famous—

"When sable night,—" and applauded with flushed face and shining eyes as she sighed out the last phrase palpitant.

"Sing for us yourself, Sir," cries Fox with his easy deference. "I know no one who can sing a better song or tell a better story. Favour Mrs. Sheridan. She has favoured you."

"Very true. Then, Madam, with your permission I'll give you your husband's famous song from the same opera."

His gay light tenor, though not perhaps as archangelic as the fond Perdita depicted it, was clear and tuneful and full of intention. He broke into the rattling tune from the "Duenna."

"If a daughter you have, she's the plague of your life.
No peace shall you know though you've buried your wife.
At twenty she mocks at the duty you taught her,—
Oh, what a plague is an obstinate daughter,
Sighing and whining,
Dying and pining,
Oh, what a plague is an obstinate daughter!"

"When scarce in their teens they have wit to perplex us—

He broke off, laughing.

"Stage fright, Madam. Now if you would deign to support me—"

Sheridan, returning from the cellar with more than one bottle under his arms, found the little company in excellent humour with each other—his shy Elizabeth as Donna Louisa warbling with the Prince as Don Antonio. It was agreed that their voices went excellently well together, and Fox in his large indolent way was enthusiastic. The Prince must come in of an evening when he had a spare half hour and practise his notes with Mrs. Sheridan. Would she—might he? She would, he might, and so at last she curtseyed herself off and left them to their bottles, anxious, for she knew very well that Sheridan had had as much as he could carry coolly already, yet flattered, as what woman would not be by this young royal homage. It might mean much for Chéri,—she knew that, and as she unloosed her long silken braids of dark hair, and thought of her little "cub" as she called him, the child in a rosy sleep in the next room, the Prince's bright image took on all the colours of hope. How could he fail to see Sheridan's power? And now, now was the moment. Now, as always in history, the young Prince was forming his own Court, all aglow with hope and youth, contrasting with the faded, disappointed older court holding its own only by custom and such right divine as the Hanoverian compromise in England had left it. To be attached to the Prince now, to win his heart, was to mount steadily with him into heights undreamed of. Charles Fox had escorted her to the drawing-room door and before he closed it on her said in a low voice, impressive in its emphasis:

"A lucky night for you, Madam. It only needed

your charm to clinch your husband's. A great future opens—"

His look said the rest. Yes, those young hands had great gifts for the giving. There was scarcely a man or woman in the Three Kingdoms but would envy them that night and its implication. And yet—

She could hear through the floor the confused murmur of voices beneath, the clink of glass and silver. As she sat she heard the door open and her husband go downstairs again. That would be for more wine. She hated the very name of it. Sheridan's vivid nature terrified her when she thought of him spurred, driven by his company to excess that to a seasoned head and more phlegmatic brain was no excess at all.

And then Perdita swam into her thoughts half veiled and haloed in tears. She had a child—a girl. That and all else she was sacrificing for this gay young Prince in his damask velvet, delicate and magnificent as a woman. What did he know or care for what was butchered to make his Roman holiday? If a child went motherless, if the brightest brain in England were drugged and damned with wine, what was it to him?

Suddenly he became terrible to her. She saw him with the painted harlotry, disguised and undisguised, of the women he would ruin, among the men he would betray. What could his life be but an irony destructive as vitriol to those he had to do with,—a pasteboard tinsel deity for whom nevertheless the bravo of political crime would stab in dark places, in whose service men would prostitute their great gifts, and women their purity, and art would wallow in the mire of his dulled comprehension? The vision was so real to her that it made her heart beat violently. Perdita—the poor Perdita, a harmless butterfly hitherto, became a type, the man himself a symbol,

and the two between them terrified her for her husband.

She went to the window and stood looking out at the moon-blanched street and dark houses, and the Prince's carriage waiting with the patient horses and the man asleep on the box. They had opened the window below and she could hear the Prince's voice loud in altercation with Fox, and Sheridan's dulcet notes soothing, agreeing, blandishing,—then a crash, a tray overturned, an oath. Oh, for their cottage at Burnham, and the great beeches silvered with moonlight, and a lonely nightingale singing outside her window, and the dewy scent of roses—roses, and the child asleep, and Chéri wandering down the garden paths, verse-making, dreaming, her young lover again. How could she sleep?

There was a dim grey line over the Eastern house-tops before the drawing-room door was flung open and stumbling steps went down the stair, and, still at the window, she could see Fox lurching down the steps supporting the Prince with the footman's assistance. The royal head hung back over his shoulder,—the man took the royal legs in his arms and between them they bundled him into the carriage, and the half-awake coachman lashed the horses and they rattled and clattered away over the pavements to—to Perdita?

At the moment Elizabeth was sick with pity for the woman who had committed herself to that.

But was her own case much better?

He did not come upstairs. She put slippers on her little cold feet, and clutching her nightdress about her, went gliding down the stair. The wax candles were guttering, dripping in the candle sockets, one, knocked over, had fallen on her papers and scorched them, but luckily had gone out. A silver salver and broken glass were on the carpet, and the room stank of wine and brandy.

Her mind was full of the utter incomprehension of a woman for men's pleasure. How could they? Stupid—vile, brutal!

Her eye fell on Sheridan huddled in a chair, almost too drunk to move, yet not entirely obfuscated in brain.

She ran to him and flung her arms about him to shut out the horrid sight, the horrid thoughts of repulsion that arose in her.

"My dear, dear Chéri!—I'm so tired. I've been waiting, waiting and thought they never would go. Oh, come with me."

"My dear pretty creature," he said, "you shouldn't have w-waited. You sh-should have slept. Your face is all white and your eyes like burnt-out l-lamps. Such a good f-fellow, Elizabeth,—s-such a charming p-prince. Honour to serve him. I'm to b-be his p-prime minister. Money—glory. No—no. I'll sleep here. My f-feet are like lead."

She could not get him up and, pushing a chair under his feet and propping him with cushions, left him in a drunken sleep.

Was it any wonder as she went slowly up the stair if the image of another man rose in her mind—Edward Fitzgerald—proud, chivalrous, self-controlled even in the more passionate flame of love for her. No temptation of the vulgar sort assailed her, but noble souls are drawn with noble baits, and some mute nameless happiness possessed her in remembering that such a man loved—understood her with passionate sympathy, that he was there—there in the same world, though so far away. A strong soul—a patient. And in the dead night and chilly dawn it seemed to her that this was the only thing that could matter. To be strong, to be patient, to be of that company—not this, oh, not this! For her mind went again to her young husband, huddled in the chair, to Fox with

the subtle look that wooed her as he wooed many women, to the reeling Prince.

Well—she had her post—her duty. To safeguard what she could of her treasure from the pickpockets of Vanity Fair. To guard her husband with a mother's love if a wife's must fade. To carry her own soul in clean hands through a world growing daily more difficult.

From that night there was a new sweetness in her tone for Chéri—a change soft and indescribable which only a woman could have understood, and one woman, her sister Mary, read with wordless compassion.

And from that night the Sheridans were launched in the greatest society of London. Sheridan, the Prince's intimate, Elizabeth—the lovely link between angel and woman both in voice and face, as the enraptured men described her, who had hopes of hearing that delicious voice tremble for them, and of seeing the sweet eyes languish coquettish lures as did the other women's of her very distinguished world.

The earthenware pots were swimming gaily down the stream beside the clashing brass ones. Sheridan had warned Perdita. He took no warning himself.

CHAPTER XV

THE WORLD

Two years had gone by since the town became aware that a new and brilliant star illumined its dingy heavens. The Prince, himself the most dazzling apparition of youth, gaiety and extravagance, had acquired a satellite whose radiance almost matched his own, and the humdrum elder court dividing its slow days between Buckingham House, Kew and Windsor, was left doubly humdrum by the contrast. It set the spring a-dancing down the grey old streets of London.

Perdita, the world called her Perdita now, had been established in luxury in Cork Street, the Prince buying the house from the Countess of Derby, who had lately been separated from her Lord, and fitting it up with all the good taste of its new occupant. She too was separated from her lord, Mr. Robinson having receded into the past along with the theatre and not only the theatre, but something of rather more consequence, his child. She was taken into the care of her good grandmother, and though Perdita felt the parting bitterly and remorsefully, she would not listen to any inner voice which forbade it. A vertigo had seized her, the intoxication of the new life, the adoration which all envied, the splendour, the opportunities she promised herself of influencing her lover to higher, better things which should make his reign memorable for its virtues, all seemed to prove her in the right, nay more, romantically, heroically in the right in sacrificing her reputation to such great ends. No one but his Perdita was listened to for a moment. What she wished

was his law. Then who was she to dare to neglect such an opportunity for good, and must there not be unusual qualities in herself which had induced Providence to choose her for this post of great responsibility?

An incurable sentimentalist, yet with a dash of high idealism also, she saw very clearly the Paladin she desired her Prince to be. She believed he had all the gifts necessary. He wanted the inspiring touch which the woman he loved alone could give him, and she who was to be that woman had the art, she believed also, to be firm as a pine and pliant as a willow in her dealings with him. Hers was to be the perfect tact which would gauge the currents of public opinion and convey them so delicately that they would influence him without wounding the royal pride she loved. Hers the task to hold a high and knightly idealism before young eyes so easily and naturally dazzled with the glories of his great position. If it wounded her when he spoke with coarse intolerance of the King and Queen, which he did with a most alarming freedom (though surely to no one else?), that would be a matter to be dealt with later, and she had glowing and secret dreams of a moment when the Queen herself would fling her arms about her neck and bless her with grateful tears for her George's regeneration and fixed filial duty.

These were hopes and feelings which transcended all the conventions, and though there were moments when the doubt occurred to her whether a woman who had deserted her husband and child to seek other duties were precisely the right person to be successful in filling them and to attract the respect which would ensure success, she could always stifle that doubt with the strong conviction of her good intentions and the powers which would enable her to carry them out. Beauty and intellect, she reflected, have ruled the world from time immemorial, and a combination of the two, furthered by the love of the first of

men—? Yet she was not more vain than other pretty women. She was only under a great strain of feeling and almost entirely ignorant of the brutal cruelty of things as they are, which have no tenderness either for beauty or high intention. She had recognized a disposition in life to treat her as an unusual person, one to be highly considered, and there certainly seemed reasons in herself why it must always be so, why she and her actions must never be confused with the common herd who might have seemed to act in the same way, but could never have the same justifications; conventions were respectable, but must stand aside for such aims as hers. It is very easy to attack the conventions with disdain, but they are an essential part of every woman's creed, deny it how she will, and they avenge themselves sooner or later with the persistency of a returning hornet.

The first clash concerned the furnishing of the house in Cork Street. Perdita's naturally good taste in things inward and outward resented the stigma of the courtesan's luxury. The last thing she wished was that scandal should be full fed with the tale of her rise from poverty to splendour, and that the inevitable impression should be that she had sold herself for what would buy the common type of adventuress with whom none must dare to confound her. She wished a dignified and beautiful simplicity to which indeed the house would have lent itself well, and had made her plans accordingly. The town might talk of it; yes, but as a marvel of elegantly restrained taste and expense. Her bedroom and dressing room were to be hung with grey watered tabby, touched here and there with faint rose and silver. The powdering closet was to be in grey marble veined with pink, and she had sketched out a bath closet (which would be noted as a rarity) in pure white marble, with a sunk bath copied from some picture of a Roman building which had caught

her eye in a portfolio at the Sheridans'. It may be reasonably doubted whether her plans would have worked out at much less cost than the Prince's, but they had the advantage in taste and she was sharply disappointed when he declared with fond emotion that he would never, no, never, consent to have his angel so beggarly housed. Of what use the advances of modern art and luxury if the first woman in England, for so he considered her, were not to have the richest, most desirable appointments that money could buy. No, she must leave it to him. She must not go near the place until his own adoring hand led her there, and then indeed she should realize what love could do in the nest it built for its idol.

She veiled her dismay in smiles and gratitude when the vistas of gold and crimson burst upon her dazzled sight. Velvet, damask, stucco columns, vast mirrors, gilded candelabra, ormolu clocks—money had indeed been spent like water. A golden coronet gathering the crimson velvet curtains crowned her bed, and an interlaced G. and P. decorated every article which possessed a decorable surface. He explained with delight that it had been a sovereign whim of Tudor ancestors to unite the initials of the beloved with the royal one, and that consideration went far to reconcile her to the expenditure of gold-leaf. It was something to be swept up into the majesties of history even if one could wish that history had had a little better taste. She said no more and hoped that when time had mellowed the glitter of crimson and gilding she should be so far enthroned as to be certain of having her own way in this as well as in matters of more importance. She gently hinted that a promised library had been forgotten and that she had promised herself the pleasure of reading to him sometimes in quiet evenings, but when he explained eagerly that this must have meant the sacrifice of the card-room, there was no more to be

said, and sighing she folded up the little list of historical romances, fictional and serious, which were to have taught him his duty to the country and posterity. Posterity was not at all considered in Cork Street, nor had the country any influence in the arrangements. The Prince had preferred the inspiration of Child, the great banker, in his enormous house of Osterley to the simplicity of the ancient Roman; and the effect of gold filigree, china and Japan cabinets, painted ceilings and crimson and gold friezes all reduced into the minimum of space to fit a medium-sized London mansion was overwhelming.

Into this gorgeous fair Rosamond's bower Perdita had now the task of fitting herself and retaining what personality she could. Here again she had her ideals. There was to be amusement and plenty of it. She was already assured by the little she knew of the Prince that this must be in the forefront of her battle. But it must be discreet, refined, with no exaggerations to be laid hold of by enemies to domestic peace and concord. The arts must be encouraged. The younger intellect of the country would look to the Prince and his brilliant companion for that. She would set herself to gather Intelligence about them if accompanied by blamelessness of life, not otherwise. The tone of her house was to be that of an august and happily married young couple who recognized their heavy duties and responsibilities and tempered them with a graceful ease and relaxation. The married note was what she would insist upon, unfailing respect for her position as the chosen of the Prince, who regarded himself as her husband in all but name, unfailing respect for the manner in which her great duties were performed. She took unconsciously an almost royal tone about this time, a gentle, reserved condescension, expressing the knowledge that those who walk upon the altitudes must do so with a circumspection quite unneces-

sary for the dwellers in the plains. It sat upon her very well, she thought.

Yet things refused to be moulded to her wish. Let her describe the difficulties: "The daily prints now indulged the malice of my enemies by the most scandalous paragraphs respecting the Prince and myself. It was too late to stop the torrent of abuse poured on me from all quarters. Whenever I appeared in public I was overwhelmed by the gazing of the multitude. I was frequently obliged to quit Ranelagh, owing to the crowd assembled round my box, and scarcely dared to enter a shop. Many hours have I waited until the waiting crowd dispersed. I cannot suppress a smile at the absurdity of such proceedings."

The abuse was disconcerting though we may guess from this tell-tale smile she found these attentions more or less of a flattery at the time, however inconvenient. Flattery indeed of all sorts was at the disposal of the lady whom the Prince delighted to honour. Gainsborough painted the lovely portrait of her known to all connoisseurs, where, seated on a grassy eminence, a fashionable Daphne strayed under the green trees, she sits gazing with thoughtful eyes into the distance, a faithful dog her only companion. It was adjudged an excellent likeness.

But certainly as time went by it was not all triumph. She felt herself thwarted.

The Prince, seen at close quarters and in frequent companionship, was not the young Florizel of the bowering walks of Kew—far from it! Released suddenly from *surveillance* as he was, all the King's forebodings were in a fair way of fulfilment. He rushed passionately into pleasure and there was no wild gaiety in which he did not shine. Politically, his friends were the enemies of the Crown; privately, the wildest and most dissipated, and she herself must become a part of this frantic dis-

sipation. The whirl caught her finally. The excitement captured her.

She was his companion openly at all public places of amusement, shining like a summer butterfly in every attire that could be judged most tasteful and costly. Her horses and carriages had cost the Prince a fortune, money was spent on her without any sense of its value. She set the fashion,—sometimes a lovely peasant with gipsy hat tied at the back of her head with streaming ribbons, sometimes a beauty of the highest *ton*, patched, rouged and powdered, with a hoop that out-hooped extravagance. Sometimes a slim Amazon, riding gauntleted and fearless. But always the very arbitress of the mode.

Great victories crowned her. The exquisite Duchess of Devonshire, once her patroness, appeared at the Pantheon in a satin of the faintest shade of rose announced as "*soleil couchant*," her head dressed prodigiously high and powdered, with floating pink ostrich plumes to match. She passed Perdita, who had half begun a curtsey, with calmly levelled eyes which saw through her to the Prince and allured him with the smile that none else could rival, and so passed on her triumphant way, the Prince whispering at her ear. Well and good. Brilliant Duchesses do not smile on ladies of the half-world.

Perdita turned pale as death, as the great young lady undulated off with her royal prey beside her. All round her were whispers and commendations of the "*soleil couchant*." No woman who valued fashion and the world's opinion would be seen in any other colour for a month. It stung her like fire. She knew very well it was a part of her business to be the very leader of the fashion, and near that throne is no room for a pretender.

She went home almost sobbing, and tore off her laces

to the surprise of Mrs. Armstead, who had followed her new fortunes without comment and as calmly as she did all else.

"You are unwell, Madam?" says she. "I'll fetch the red lavender drops."

"No—no. 'Tis this hateful dress. What possessed you to advise me wear yellow—me that's as pale to-night as a candle. Sure any woman that *is* a woman could see it turned me sallow! I'll never trust your judgment more. Bundle the thing up and throw it out of the window."

Without turning an eyelash Mrs. Armstead disengaged the story from the sobs. Her eyes sparkled with feminine fire. She felt herself assaulted in her art. She picked up the satin and surveyed it as a general his *carte du pays*.

"Why, indeed, Madam, I own it something less than a triumph though still a beautiful gown. But you'll recall it came from Madame Duboyer so late that I could not correct the garniture as I would. My taste is all for damask roses with that peculiar yellow—an emphasis is needed to correct the insipidity. But leave it to me. It shall be a triumph next time you honour it. And see here—as I walked this evening through the Mall I saw an orange wench with a handkerchief tied about her mop of black hair. It had been a full purple, but was faded by weather in parts into the most delicate delightful hue your eyes ever lit on. She was something of your complexion and it made her cheeks like pink hawthorn and her eyes like pools of ink. Didn't I see at once I had a novelty? I bought it from her for a shilling and washed it, for— Faugh! See here!" She held out a silken rag, perfumed with essence, and laid it by Perdita's cheek—as she sank sighing into a chair and looked at it with faintly reviving interest.

"I'll have a length of satin dyed at once, and you shall see. We'll down the Duchess yet! Cheer up, Madam! Mix your dress with brains—and you'll shine like the moon among the stars. A thousand women must have passed the lass, but 'twas only I saw her handkerchief."

She towered above Perdita, extraordinarily glowing and handsome in her pride. Yes, Mrs. Armstead had brains. Not all however for her mistress's advancement. She did not mention that it was not in the Mall she had seen the girl of the handkerchief, but in a quiet back street not far from Cork Street and that she herself had worn a thick lace veil to her hat and had been in earnest discourse with a gentleman to whom she narrated all she could gather and observe, which was not a little, of the Prince's waywardness with his Perdita.

"'Twill never last!" said she. "I gave it a year to flame, three months to dwindle and another three to burn itself out into ash. She's too sentimental for him, cries too easily, is too easily wounded. Loads him with mawkish verse when she should be all shine and sparkle. If she could whip him with a suspicion of jealousy—Shall I advise her, Sir?"

"No—by no means. Let the affair take its course. There are influences far more valuable than hers which I could wish to see in play later. Not that I wish any harm to the poor handsome creature—nor, I am sure, do you, Mrs. Armstead. But she must take her chance."

"We women must all do that!" says the lady, sighing delicately. "But indeed Mrs. Robinson, though a charming woman, has not the art to hold a man forever. Her sentiment wears thin into little tempers, and she is too occupied with her beauty to remember that habit makes all beauty dull, and 'tis only the mind that lasts. She can be no support to a man—but is creeping and

clinging all over him and bedewing him with tears and forever writing poetry."

"One could indeed weary of that!" said the gentleman, laughing. "Even in such a beauty. But you are a close observer of human nature, Mrs. Armstead, and any observation you may make in Cork Street will be of interest in important matters. I need not tell a woman of your abilities that everything concerning the Prince must be important. And if a little gift—"

She drew back haughtily:

"I think, Sir, I mentioned before that I don't accept presents. I have my own aims in life and—may I wish you a good evening."

She sank low in an elegant curtsey, and Mr. Charles James Fox was surprised into a bow quite as polite as that he accorded to the great ladies who fluttered about his rising political power as moths to a candle.

But at the next great night Perdita appeared at the Pantheon in a dress of satin announced as "*soupir etouffé*," the palest lilac that ever greeted the eye, her dark hair out-towering the fair Devonshire's and dressed with pearls and lilac blossoms. Not an eye turned on the Duchess and her "*soleil couchant*"—the sun of that particular toilette was indeed set, and the world hummed and buzzed about the victress, and not a woman there, the duchess herself included, but went home to plan a dress of "*soupir etouffé*" to the full limit of her husband's purse and patience.

Need it be said it was Sheridan who had suggested the name—the conquering name of the new colour? He was often in Cork Street, being now a necessary part of the Prince's circle, and though he never met Perdita alone, never exchanged a confidence with her, he saw her much, and led the jest and rattle which she was obliged to provide for the Prince as regularly as her kisses.

"*Soupir etouffé*" was the rage of the season; even the mocking Mrs. Thrale wore it, and appealed to the learned Dr. Johnson as to what on earth the name could mean. He shook his ponderous head over the puzzle.

"Why, Madam, I know not. Unless indeed—why, yes! This pale lilac is called a stifled sigh because it is checked in its progress and only half a colour!"

And this flying round London, the ladies accepted it, and the Duchess's only effort at retaliation was that her feathers in the new hue were four inches beyond what Perdita could procure. Their unspoken rivalry mounted and grew more intense with every month that passed. It went deeper than dress.

She could never assure herself that she was happy. It was more of a vertigo. She likened herself sometimes to a whirling dervish who cannot pause in his giddy round lest he drop. The Prince was insatiable of amusement. Her first and most eager care was daily to plot, if possible, some new folly to wing the time. If that failed he was at once sullen, disconsolate, yawning, devoid of any resource, eager to brighten the tedium with drink and cards. Fortunately trifles amused him. Even the details of her toilette gave him pleasure; the rivalry with the Duchess delighted him.

"Up and at her, Perdita. You are a rising star—she has had her season. Down with her!" And this though he was more than half in love with her Grace, and Perdita knew very well that the fair Duchess would be swaying the fashion when she herself was not even a memory. Rank outlasts beauty.

Dazzled, giddy as she was, for indeed she had scarcely time to think of anything but the amusements which were vital to her hold on the Prince, her pleasures began to be seasoned with fear, for it dawned on her with the chilly grey of disillusionment that there was no holding ground

in the Prince. His sentiment—that on which she had counted most, was lip-deep, no more. He would listen with moist eyes while she read some ballad of Shenstone's in the Edwin and Angelina style or sing with languishing pathos a song of sugar-sweets. It was a sentimental age, and men of sentiment wept over any maudlin platitude which caught their taste. Perdita would watch those brimming eyes and glory in the tender heart they bespoke until, the next moment, he would come out with some callous comment on the dog, the footman, some woman of their acquaintance. He would forget an engagement on which she had set her heart and laugh at her dismay at his forgetfulness.

Her only confidante was Mrs. Armstead. It had come to that; she relied on her as a weak nature does on a strong one. When the Prince affronted her either through carelessness or with design to see how she took it, Mrs. Armstead was her counsellor.

"Why, Madam, it must be so with a young man whom all the world conspires to spoil. Believe me, your beauty will hold him if you keep it unspoilt by these passions. And an equal temper and sunny smile are as great charms as ever your lovely fair skin, which I have never seen equalled, and great eyes."

"I know it—I know it—oh, if I had the half of your wisdom!" sighs Perdita. "If I could but learn that pity never moves him! I plead in vain."

"Pity never moves any man!" says the mentor, laying a dark curl with exquisite effect over Perdita's snowdrift brow. "They have no hearts. They have but propensities, and the wise woman masters those and plays on them as a lady on the harpsichord. 'Tis an odd thing, Madam. They can pity a child, a dog—even on occasion a sister or a parent. But the woman they have loved—

never. I think cruelty is a part of their inclination,—I am no lover of that sex."

"You have perhaps had sorrows from them."

Perdita looked up with languid curiosity. After all, this handsome reticent creature must have some story of her own that halted quick tongue and drew a veil over sparkling eyes. That a woman should speak so little of herself was out of nature. She tossed the subject off now with a hard smile.

"Why, no, Madam. I don't complain. I do but pretend to a little observation. Will you wear your rose satin sacque to-morrow? And what at Vauxhall to-night?"

"The Prince has not told me his wishes. Give me a *negligée* and I'll wait until he comes in. Oh, Mrs. Armstead, I'm so fatigued I can scarce keep my head off the pillow, and these late hours give me the appearance of a woman of thirty. If I could but have one quiet month in the country! Quiet and fresh air and—and peace."

The strange woman looked at her mistress with compassion.

"I feel for all women," she said. "I never yet knew one that life spared. It comes sooner or later. But when you smile, Madam, none could tell you were fatigued. Smile therefore!"

"A soul may be weary enough behind the cover of a smile," Perdita said sadly. But the moment she touched on sensibility the other was marble.

"Lord! Look at your jewels, Madam. I know no better cure!" says she, and going to the strong cupboard, pulled out tray after tray of sparklers. "What shall we choose for the rose-colour sacque you wear to-morrow? Pearls to match your skin or diamonds to match your eyes when you laugh. Ah, I thought so! (as Perdita

smiled faintly over her treasures!). Look at that brooch with hanging loops of diamonds! The sacque is cut almost dangerously low, and that between your breasts —and a knot of black velvet for your throat—and one black patch just there in the very centre of your dimple and another in the hollow of your bosom to rise and fall when you breathe, with a powdered curl to drop on your shoulder—"

Mrs. Armstead's fine upper lip took on an ironic curl, unseen as she stooped over the trays. If she disliked men she certainly did not honour her own sex. "Toys for children!" she said in her own mind, as she noted the half-wearied pleasure dawning in Perdita's eyes over the jewels. For herself they had no faintest attraction except as means to an end.

"Pearls," said Perdita. "How lovely—how they become a woman! Sure heaven must have foreseen beautiful women when it gave such a treasure to the oyster. I'll wear them, although since I have heard nothing of the Prince by this time, he must have made some other engagement. Still, I'll wear the pearls to-night for my own pleasure."

But in spite of herself she sighed as she clasped them about her throat.

Mrs. Armstead put the treasures away with due care when her lady left the room. "The world's mine oyster which I with—" She smiled and changed the word "sword" for "skill" in the quotation, then went to her own room and sat down to write to Mr. Fox.

Perdita in her rose-coloured ribbons was reading by a silver lamp half an hour later, alone for a marvel.

A strange life. But it had another aspect beside frivolous gaiety however—the company of the distinguished men who paid court to the Prince at the house in Cork Street, and that had developed her intellectually

almost in spite of herself. All the talents did homage to that rising sun and therefore to his satellite. Burke, Henderson, Wilkes among the politicians, Sir Joshua Reynolds—but indeed to continue the list would be to include nearly all that was most celebrated in England at the time. Sheridan, eminent now as a politician and no less as the man of intellect, came often, the gayest of the gay, the delight of the Prince as a *convive*, the very epitome of his own Charles Surface at extravagant feast and drinking bout. Indeed the last years had made a more reckless man of him, and no company suited the Prince's wild humour better. She never saw him alone, never exchanged a word of reminiscence with him, but sometimes would catch "the finest eyes in the world," as they were called, fixed on her and as quickly averted. His presence dulled that of other men by the sheer effulgence of his gaiety. A difference, a something that spoke of intelligence piercing as the diamond, made him brilliant among the brilliant. She observed it more keenly now than ever she had done before. Possibly he exerted himself more strenuously to shine in such distinguished company, and might hope even to dim Royalty by his radiance. She did not know, but thought much of him at times, and with a kind of fear. Their worlds were so near and yet so far.

She was reading a book of flattering turgid verses. Many poets far from being admitted to that shining solar system sent her their slender volumes laden with hopes as slender, for their aim was that she should interest the coming King in their Muse, and none but herself knew how impossible was the task of interesting him in anything higher than the pleasures of the moment, though many began to guess. It was natural that she should be publicly blamed as chief misleader amongst the Prince's intimates and as such she was cruelly lampooned and

coarsely satirized in the prints and pamphlets of the day. And yet the truth is no one deserved it less. She grew graver as he grew wilder. She ventured nothing in words—who could?—but her looks were more eloquent than wise when he would come reeling in, stuttering out the wild stories he heard from Fox and others to be noted later. Grossnesses which Sheridan's finer instincts despised, for though he could do a gross thing, in gross words he could not face it. And Perdita's tear-clouded silence was a mute reproach the Prince flung off angrily until, all melting tenderness, she clasped him once more in her arms.

This book on her lap had an elegant dedication to the English Sappho, but it must be owned that Sappho sighed rather than throbbed over it. As she laid it aside, the door handle turned and the Prince came lounging in, his hat under his arm.

He was splendidly dressed in a violet satin coat and breeches laced with silver and as handsome a young man as could be wished even in his exalted position. But, studying the face more closely, it might be imagined a little damaged by the years of free living, as a fine picture exposed to too warm a sunlight suffers a little in tint and fineness of outline,—indefinable at first, but later too plain in its destructive progress.

She rose to receive him as he flung himself into a chair.

"Anybody expected to-night?"

"Why, no, Sir. I had not your pleasure about Vauxhall and scarcely expected though I hoped for yourself, so I set an evening for rest if you did not wish to go out, having been out of bed until near dawn all the week. Are you not tired?"

"My head aches damnably," he said, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. "What a cursed fetter is the body! A man wants to be amusing himself—can't stand

these damn dull evenings! and instead of cards and pleasures, a contemptible pain in the temples pins one to a chair. What's life when all's said and done, with so little to be got out of it!"

She said nothing but bestirred herself with a lace handkerchief and scented waters to cool his brow, which was burning hot under her cool hands. The service pleased her. A woman of any delicacy becomes more domestic, more connubial in her leanings as time goes by, even in an illicit union. She seeks to regularize her position with a hundred delicate attachments and is a wife in soul, let the world regard her how it will. Each evening he spent alone with her, few indeed and difficult, was a gift she treasured. She could imagine that thus husband and wife might sit, she attending him and soothing his pains and anxieties.

He endured it for a moment, then flung the handkerchief aside and called for claret.

"I have a thirst on me like the great Desert. Do for God's sake, Perdita, bestir yourself and recover me sufficiently to go where I am promised."

"And where is that? Vauxhall?" She was filling a great frosted goblet with wine in which it glowed, rubied and be-diamonded.

"My uncle Cumberland's!" says he, draining it. "Fill it again! The Duchess is a very much maligned woman and one of the prettiest ever I saw. She has a way with her—you haven't that way, Perdita! She sparkles. You can't sparkle except the words are given you on the stage. I've seen you sparkle there. I wish to God you would do so here!"

"Do you like the wine best?" she said tenderly, renewing the wet handkerchief when she had filled his glass again. She knew well he had had as full a cargo already as was good for him, but dared no remonstrance which

would have been useless and worse. Her experience had not commenced with the Prince in this particular. The symptoms had been common with Mr. Robinson also. Besides she was eager to sound this new information and must avoid to irritate him.

"I did not know you would allow yourself to visit Cumberland House, beloved. May your Perdita ask, Might it not make difficulties between my Prince and his Majesty? I know their Royal Highnesses are forbid to approach the Court."

"So much the better for them! Picture any woman of sense or spirit condescending to show herself at that fusty musty abode of all the horrors. What do I care what the King thinks! You had not been here, Perdita, if I had cared a damn for that."

True, and it closed her lips. A moment of soft appliance of her hand and handkerchief on his brow followed, and then she ventured timidly again:

"Do you often go to Cumberland House, my Prince?"

"When I please. What concern is it of yours? I go where I please and won't be questioned. Sure a man may seek his aunt's society without jealousy." (He pointed this with a laugh.) "The prettiest aunt in the world!"

Others undoubtedly agreed with this verdict. Let Mr. Horace Walpole, who should be a judge, describe her Luttrell Highness:

"She was rather pretty than handsome (says he) and had more the air of a woman of pleasure than a woman of quality. But there was something so bewitching in her languishing eyes which she could animate to enchantment, and her coquetry was so habitual that it was difficult not to see through it and as difficult to resist it. She danced divinely and had a good deal of wit of the satiric kind."

Thus said the sage of Strawberry Hill and it will be allowed a charming portrait of an aunt!

The Prince now favored Perdita with his own description which accorded with the above, though less polished and terse.

"She has a kind of *je ne sais quoi* that goes to a man's head as good as wine and raises his spirits. I vow she never stops laughing at some one or somebody—mostly somebody, for she has a gift to make every one appear ridiculous that she will. You should see her, Perdita. She has the longest eyelashes in England, and they lie down on her cheek like a sleeping child's, and up they flash and the wickedest light under them and out pops some wicked little saying from her pretty mouth and the whole room's in a roar. That's what pleases me—a laughing beauty! Pity I can't take you there. You might learn a lesson or two."

"Of what?" says Perdita, constraining herself, and touching the luxuriously closed eyelids with fingers light as thistledown.

"Of what? Why, to be gay and keep a man's spirits up."

"And say wicked nothings?"

"Why not? They don't come amiss from a charming mouth, and make people laugh. Your fault's gravity, Perdita. You're a weeping willow—she's—damme if I know what—a rose hot in the sun, all invitation. You'd as soon listen to an old man prosing twattle as to a young man making love."

"I had sooner listen to one young man making love than to all the wisdom of the world," says she fondly.

"Don't I know, my angel's heart? But yet—you're too serious. A young man wants amusing. You forget that sometimes. If I was an old bachelor—if I was over thirty—I wouldn't desire a sweeter companion for my idle hours."

"Idle hours!" Indeed that phrase pained her. It sank

what was left of her hopes. She inwardly felt herself worth more than that light estimate—a companion for better than idle hours. Yet again conscience struck its blow. Had she not rather condescended to his tastes than striven to raise him to hers?

"But as it is, you do!" she says softly. "Well, do the poor temples ache less?"

"Yes—'tis the wine does me good. I knew it would. Give me more."

"Does his Royal Highness improve on you, too?" she asked, sifting him delicately as the wine went down.

"Why, yes—I never heard him anything but abused at Kew and Buckingham House, but he's a roistering, merry, good-hearted fellow. No one who isn't as full of moral precepts as Joseph Surface is acceptable in those two prisons, for I call 'em no less. I've no fault to find with the Duke!"

He ranted on, working himself into a kind of fuddled anger, and presently went off, as she supposed, to Cumberland House.

"She has a name for you," he flung back at the door. "Miss Propriety Prue, she calls you, and says it's the wittiest thing in the world to see such a long-faced prude a man's plaything. You couldn't but laugh yourself if you heard her. You *are* a prude, you know, my love, at heart! in spite of—— Well, of me! You should have been one of her Majesty's ladies of waiting by rights. Lord! where's my hat!"

He began searching for his hat, and she got up and gave it to him with such kisses and smiles as she could summon up at the moment. He was not particular. They served well enough.

The door shut and she sat with much to consider. What bulked largest was the first word of criticism. Not much, true, the light humour of a spoilt boy, but—the first! For

a while it dwarfed even Cumberland House to her mind, and then slowly her reason connected the two and she beheld the danger, and gathered her wits to fight it.

A prude! and she had exerted herself night and day in a freedom and gaiety she often had to affect, for, taken on a grander stage, there were unhappy points of resemblance between her present life and the former. There was luxury and lavish expense and no menace of a debtor's prison, but there was the Prince coming in drunk instead of Mr. Robinson, and the rattle of dice and cards that she hated, and to be more stared at at Ranelagh and Vauxhall was not the salve to the tedium of frequenting them that she felt it to be at first. Certainly the jewels,—the pearls—her milliner's victories, were not always consolatory, though she made the most of them to the world and herself. They drugged a fear which would not sleep, but lifted its head and looked her in the face with snaky eyes, as it did now. She began to know herself wearied, body and soul.

The truth was, setting aside the gulf in rank, the Prince and Mr. Robinson had so many tastes in common that she may be excused for questioning in some bitter moments whether 'twas worth while to change the one for the other. That brief year had taught her a bitter wisdom.

You will figure a sleepless night with such thoughts as companions.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SLIPPING BOND

She sat down next morning, pale with fatigue, and wrote to Mr. Sheridan, requesting his company that day, and received a speedy reply by the messenger to say he would do himself the honor to wait on her at noon.

It is certain his quick wit gave him some premonition of her views, for he cast a look of doubt at her as he entered bowing. It was certainly also no surprise to him to find her alone for the first time since she embarked on her new life. The very look of her writing told him mischief was afoot, and he could pretty well guess its form. He might wonder how she would take it, however, for though nothing had passed between them but what all the world might hear, he had observed her closely. He thought her much changed since her elevation, so much that he could now guess little of the heart within. She had gained in dignity and self-control and therefore in beauty, her features and figure inclining always to the extreme of refinement and good breeding. This suited her, and he looked back with a vein of wonder to the liberties of candor and criticism he had permitted himself with her in days gone by. He entered now with the utmost ceremony.

"I have done myself the favour to obey your commands and wait on you, Madam."

"I trust it was not inconvenient, Sir."

"Had it been, the pleasure would have been the greater, but 'twas quite convenient. May I ask what commands you have to lay on me?"

Her pallor became her and the large eyes shadowing outward into a gravity of deep lashes—a beautiful woman, though she had lost the quickly changing play of expression that some admired as her greatest beauty on the stage. When off guard it was mostly pensive and had the air of one revolving a mystery of doubt. True, in her hand she carried a laughing mask for protection. The mask of a smile is quickly slipped on. The opening of a door, the turn of a chair, and it is in place and raying pleasure on the beholders. She did not wear it now, however.

"Mr. Sheridan, I beseech you, lay aside ceremony and speak to me as an old friend in trouble who once more asks your counsel."

"In trouble, Madam? The gay, the fortunate companion of the Prince?"

She put that half-taunt aside, and went on:

"Do you remember before I entered on this engagement that you were kind enough to warn me on three heads?"

"Madam, I have long forgotten all misgivings and warnings. How otherwise in face of such triumphs?"

She thought this cruel. She knew his penetration too well to believe it, but put the sneer gently aside also.

"Mr. Sheridan, long ago you said: 'We are not now on the boards!' I am playing no part. Believe me, I am in great anxiety. May I break the matter with you?"

He was about to interpose some gay nothing, but the look in her face forbade it. Suddenly he threw aside the fine gentleman and became real and penetrable.

"I am at your service."

That was the tone she could respond to. It encouraged and strengthened her where the other repelled. At once she related to him what had passed the night before,

omitting only what her sensibility construed as slights upon herself, and therefore treason to her lover if repeated.

"You will remember, Sir, that you warned me anxiously against the Prince's becoming involved with the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland. Counsel me, I entreat you, now that I am at the beginning of that difficulty."

"Beginning, Madam?" cried he, utterly astonished. "Why, do you not know—for 'tis common knowledge that the Prince is forever at Cumberland House? Often he spends whole days and nights there. Their Majesties are in the profoundest anxiety, both from the Duke's well-known perversity of principle and his political influence, which is of the worst. I surely thought you knew this."

"How could I? I hear nothing but what the Prince tells me. Oh, Mr. Sheridan, if you knew it you surely might have afforded me a word of warning! I don't say my pain should detain you a minute, but he is the Heir to the Crown, and an Englishman might give his ruin a thought."

"An Irishman!" corrected Sheridan, with one of his brilliant enigmatic smiles. She scarcely heard him.

"I have observed how careless his talk grows. He comes in more often drunk than sober. I have feared—sometimes I have *terribly* feared, it may be my companionship that is thus lowering him."

"Yours, Madam?" he cried, indignant. "Did you but guess the company he meets at Cumberland House you would know yours is his only hope. 'Tis said at the clubs that the Duke is deliberately debauching him for a revenge on the King and in a lesser degree on you."

"Then it is my most miserable fault!" She wrung her hands in an agony of fear and contrition, paused on a sob and went on:

"Oh, what can I do! Should I leave him instantly? I

have had another fear also. How do his money affairs stand? I know nothing for certain, but can guess the sums spent enormous."

" 'Tis said he is up to his ears in debt. Burke told me t'other day he believed his bill for clothes alone was £10,000 this year. But don't trouble for that. A long-suffering Parliament will not suffer his debts to go unpaid. You astonish me, Madam. Is it possible all this is unknown to you? Mr. Fox, myself, and all his friends deplore it. 'Tis the last influence to be wished for the Heir to the Crown. But to be honest, I believed you yourself had told Mr. Fox he was perpetually at Cumberland House. You may rely that the Prince has hidden it, for he values Charles's opinion. How could he have heard it? I am certain it came from this house. Is it really possible you were ignorant of it?"

"Entirely. I live among enemies and flatterers. Who should tell me! But this is worse than the worst I dreaded. What shall I do?—where turn?"

"For yourself or him, Madam?"

"For him."

"Stay where you are and endeavour to gain his confidence with every charm and grace in your power. Capture his heart and senses by every complaisance. Then use that influence to restrain him. Not suddenly and violently, but with the utmost *finesse*. He is still very young. There may be time. Be not too grave with him. He can't bear the didactic. Stoop to conquer."

"God knows I have stooped. Will you yourself speak to him!" she implored, and seeing his face harden, continued:

"He admires and imitates you more than any man I know. He regards you as the very soul of wit and spirit. You have influence."

"No, Madam. Such influence as I have with the Prince

is gained by avoiding contradiction. And Dick Sheridan to preach morality! The very thought would send him into fits of laughter. My connection with him has nothing to do with the moralities. It is political and I mean to keep it strictly to that."

Did he, indeed? Did he believe, as Perdita had fatally done, that the machine could catch his garment and not drag him wholly into its wheels? His Elizabeth could have told him a different story. She knew very well what those midnight carouses with the Prince and Charles Fox cost her husband not only in money but in all the gifts of youth and genius and health. She could have told him what the *soirées* meant in Great Queen Street (soon to be the more fashionable Bruton Street), where all the fashionables came and gossiped and chattered and intrigued, decrying the King and Queen, and plotting a very different world when the Prince should be in power. The Sheridans' visits to Chatsworth and the other great houses, with the inevitable cost and the gaming in which she as well as he must join to keep pace with the great ladies, were another item. And Elizabeth could have told him also what he little knew she guessed—of moonlight hidings with the lovely Mrs. Crewe in the great conservatories—of stolen walks in the parks, of a heart that grew colder and colder to his wife, more and more absorbed by the soft witcheries of Amoret. He was paying dear for his politics and was to pay dearer still. Already men began to whisper that to be the Prince's friend was a danger wise men would shun. But Sheridan could not shun it—the brilliance, the wild extravagance, the dalliance, the wit, found a willing victim in him. They appealed to his quick, passionate brain, to the artist's sensualism, to the Irishman's worship of pride and power. Nothing but his intellect outsoared them, and they had power to lay that dormant, to steal the pen from his hand, and to direct

the brilliance of his wit to the amusement of an idle Prince instead of to the delight of posterity.

Perdita's story only interested him now so far as her conclusions might influence his own fortunes. It was a very faint and far-off pity. She felt the chill in him though she could not guess the cause.

"I must bear my own burden," she began—and hesitated.

"Surely a glittering one? I know no more cheerful companion than his Royal Highness. When he is pleased—"

"What when he is not? It's evident I fail to amuse him or he would not be so often at Cumberland House. I thought he was with you and Fox."

"So he is often. But he slips off there away from us. We thought he went to you, and then Charles ascertained that it was the other. But how, I cannot tell. Charles knows everything that's of consequence to his plans."

"Then will you advise me what to do?"

"Surely I have done so. Charm him. Hold him. Set every delight for him,—make this house a Paradise."

She tortured her brows over it.

"What can I do I haven't done? I lie awake half the night making schemes for enjoyment for the day. Sometimes I fear he sees too much of me—gets tired." She tried to catch the words back, but too late.

"Gets tired?" Sheridan said sombrely. "Ah, that's the rub. Men do get tired. Some tire very easily. Does he complain?"

All her pride defended her.

"No—no! I didn't mean what you think. Let us talk of it no more. I'll do what I can about Cumberland House and am grateful for the warning. Mr. Sheridan—how is your dear beautiful wife?"

"Why, as well as usual. In high beauty and singing

like a choir of nightingales. She saw you driving not long since and spoke of you kindly."

"And my maid saw her—lovely as an angel at Richmond last week, walking with Lord Edward Fitzgerald. She told me that all faces turned to see her. I craved for the sight of her myself."

"With Fitzgerald. I don't believe it."

He turned sharp round in his chair and looked into her eyes. Something in his tone startled her. She was easily startled now. Her eyes distended as she looked at him.

"With Fitzgerald? Are you sure?"

"She certainly said so. Why? I have met him at your house in the old days."

She spoke as if they were a long time gone. Certainly it had been in another world she sat with Mrs. Sheridan and her gay merry sister, and heard their happy talk and listened to their sweet voices.

Sheridan stumbled.

"Nothing. Only I had thought him in Ireland. He has interests there. But as I was saying—"

They were interrupted by the lacquey's noiseless foot at the door.

"A lady desires to speak with Madam."

"Impossible! I can see no one. Tell the lady to leave her name and another time I'll see her."

He presented a salver with a letter at her elbow, and in her astonishment she opened it and pushed it over to Sheridan. A line, no more.

"The Countess Harcourt requests to see Mrs. Robinson."

In a lightning flash his swift wits had grasped the meaning. The Queen's favourite lady of the Bedchamber —her close friend, her intimate. And in this house of all others in London! He saw at once a situation more

poignant than any in his comedies, and assumed the direction of the stage.

"Show the lady up!" and as the man closed the door:

"Compose yourself instantly. This is a message from the Queen. You may play a great and deserving part, if you will."

"Oh, stay with me—stay!" cries Perdita, clutching at his sleeve. "I daren't—I can't face her alone. I shall sink into the earth. Stay! The Queen? It kills me!"

He looked at her sternly.

"If you can't prove yourself worthy the occasion you'll be the worthless baggage they must believe you! How can I stay? I'll wait in the next room. Compose yourself. Be yielding and obsequious."

He glided into the boudoir that opened off the withdrawing room, leaving the door ajar, and Perdita, half dead with fear and agitation, had not even the strength to totter to the mirror to collect her looks before the enemy was upon her.

A tall, elegant woman in a concealing pelisse, a deep veil of black lace thrown over her hat, was ushered in by the lacquey without any announcement, and made a stiff curtsey near the door, which Perdita had scarcely strength to return. It was not till the man was gone she advanced and, declining the offered chair, remained standing.

"Madam, you must be extremely surprised at my visit, and nc doubt an apology is due, but it may admit of forgiveness when you know my errand."

"Be so good as to explain it, Madam." She could utter nc more. The words stuck in her throat.

"The subject is extremely delicate. I speak in confidence."

"I shall not break it, Madam."

"We rely on that. It is understood in high places that you have much influence with the Prince of Wales."

"Not as much as I could wish, Madam."

She stood, her eyes fixed on the ground like a prisoner at the bar, but that was passed by and the lady continued, with a certain cool contempt:

"It is believed that you cannot desire to see his ruin, whatever your relations with him."

"That belief does me justice," faltered Perdita, almost tottering as she stood, so great was the press of emotion upon her.

"Pray let us be seated!" said Lady Harcourt, softening a little as she saw the ghastly pallor of the successful mistress. She set the example and Perdita sank into a chair.

"I come, Madam, with an entreaty from one who might command, that you will use all your influence against this fatal intimacy with the Duke of Cumberland. It is known to those whom most it pierces that that bad man and woman are doing their wicked utmost to deprave his mind and wreck his principles. It is believed you are entirely ignorant of this and that the company he meets at their house is of the most detestable, and that you could not think it desirable, if you were aware, and though those I represent must deplore your connection with his Royal Highness—forgive this candour!—it still is felt that your weight, if thrown on the other side, may hinder the far-reaching misfortune which in his position this is bound to be."

Even in the dreadful agitation that almost rendered her incapable of speech, Perdita felt the maternal agony that must have driven the Queen to this tragical expedient. She could not indeed wholly estimate what it must have cost her Majesty because her own case could not to her appear so heinous as it must in those eyes; but yet a dimness obscured her sight and a tremor shook her from head to foot as she attempted to answer the messenger.

"Your Ladyship, if I dared to express myself, but I don't dare—"

"Pray, Madam, compose yourself and speak your mind. The case is so urgent that ordinary circumstances have no connection with it."

The high-bred restraint of the great lady's demeanour aided the poor, trembling woman to command herself. Her emotion impressed my Lady Harcourt not a little in her favour.

"Then, Madam, I beseech you to tell her Majesty that, though unworthy of her slightest consideration, I have a heart to feel this danger. I only learnt it last night, and with terrors inexpressible, and all I can do—if anything—shall be done to obey her Majesty's commands by her humblest, most unworthy subject. I will labour night and day to counteract this fatal influence. Oh, Madam, words fail me, but I beseech and entreat you to speak for me and make this believable where I cannot."

"I do, I will believe it!" said the Countess, a little moved from her rigidity of contempt and with a tone of feeling in her voice, which her court training condemned. She continued:

"And if anything occurs to you that might be valuably done to break off this unfortunate intimacy at Cumberland House, may I take it you would communicate it to me?"

She rose as she spoke, evidently anxious the interview should end as soon as possible. Perdita, leaning with one hand on her chair for support, rose also, scarce able to get her words out.

"I promise, Madam."

Even as the sound left her lips the door was thrown open and the Prince entered.

It was a usual hour for him, but so interrupted had his visits been of late that the possibility had escaped her

altogether. In the utmost astonishment he surveyed the scene,—Perdita, pale as a ghost, clinging to the chair, Lady Harcourt facing her, and both turning in a ghastly surprise to the door as he appeared.

Instantly Lady Harcourt curtseyed low to his bow. She attempted no explanation, knowing that none would avail, and without a word said on either side, she moved with the utmost dignity to the door, and he escorted her down the staircase and to her chair in the street. In silence they met, in silence they parted. Then, red and furious, burning with suspicion, he rushed up again to the unhappy Perdita.

She stood exactly as he had left her, a fixed statue of fear, little fit to bear the torrent of words he poured forth upon her shrinking head.

So she was in plot with the Court, was she? The King's spy! What was she paid for her services? Here in the house which he had provided her, where he had lavished adoration, money, jewels—what not, upon her, she betrayed him to his worst enemies! The Duke and Duchess of Cumberland had warned him she was a spy, and worse, and worse!— And then, unworthy to be related, poured forth accusations against her honour, names snatched up at random, impossible to controvert as anything suddenly thus hurled must be, had she even the strength to rebut it.

She stood, with bowed head, like a drooping lily in a thunderstorm. Her bodily strength failed before the furious rush of words, as he stood hurling hatred and defiance at her—past tenderness forgot as though it had never been—and she could not have answered one single word if her life depended on it. It seemed an eternity that he raged on.

"I had rather have surprised you with a lover, Madam, a thousand times, for that at least is human nature. But

to be a crawling, worming spy that licks with poison the hand that feeds it— This ends all! I go, and never will see you more."

She tried then to put a feeble word in without betraying her Majesty, yet could not. Finally she sank into the chair and hid her face and let the storm rage about her uncontrolled until even his passion was satisfied and he flung out of the room and down the stairs, leaving her more dead than alive. She could hear his loud order below: "To Cumberland House," through the open window.

It is to be believed she partly swooned, for when she recovered consciousness, Sheridan was kneeling beside her and holding her hand in his.

"Thank God," he said. "I dared not call assistance for fear of the scandal. But your eyes open. Rest. Say not a word. I'll wait."

She closed her eyes again in a dull exhaustion that as yet admitted not of sorrow. The mere cessation of anger and abuse was rest,—this and no more she felt.

It appeared a long while before strength returned to her with pain for its companion. She put his hand aside then and sat up, looking at the window almost absently.

" 'Tis all over!" she said in a singular quiet.

"Believe me, no!" says Sheridan, very earnest. "You must pardon him, for this took him on his weak point, hatred of his parents that the Cumberlands foster daily, and 'tis but a foolish boy drunk with liberty. Indeed you have an inspiring work before you to break that cursed influence, and sure with so signal a trust and honour conferred on you 'tis possible."

"If it is to be done it falls to others, not me," she said, still with quiet. "His fancy for me is done,—gone like yesterday. Things were said—you heard?"

"Not by any means all!" he replied with ready tact.

"I weighed whether to enter, but thought in his then mood it must inevitably draw more censure on you. Any imputation might have rushed from his lips at the moment."

"You judged right," she replied, and relapsed into thought again. Presently:

"Mr. Sheridan, go now. You cannot estimate how it wounds me that you overheard that scene. Leave me to myself in pity. I die of weariness."

He could but obey; and with a compassionate look at her, went silently down the stair.

All day she lay there watching the shifting lights on the high white walls and ceiling and the roar of London without. Scenes of the utmost moment to her ruined hopes were transacting unknown to her, and she knew, and it may be said, cared nothing, so dulled was sensation.

CHAPTER XVII

THE QUEEN'S SORROW

Lady Harcourt returned to Windsor, so deep in anxious thought that she scarcely lifted her head as the carriage rolled past Eton College and through the narrow streets. Even when the horses began to climb the Castle Hill she was uncertain how much to say to the Queen and whether to conceal the Prince's entry. That his knowledge of her visit might do terrible harm she knew very well, and she trembled to increase the Queen's burden by a feather-weight, knowing well how little support she could have from the King. It was no secret to Lady Harcourt, who was deep in the Queen's confidence, that there were moments unbreathed to any other, when the King's nervous excitability gave her the greatest alarm, and the more so because she dared warn none who approached him to spare him in any way. It seemed a cruel part to bring her fresh anxieties from this attempt, so difficult to make, and from which she had hoped so much. And Lady Harcourt's terrors would have been tenfold had she guessed that Sheridan was within hearing—Sheridan, the boon companion of the Prince and Fox, the man whose sinister brilliance, for so it must seem to the Court, was leading him deeper and deeper into the maze of dissipation—Sheridan, who was regarded as sympathetic, with Fox and the Prince, to all the dangerous Radicalism that was the sure beginning of Revolution in France. Indeed the times were difficult and dangerous at best and the tremblings of earthquake were felt even in the settled constitution of

England by those who were awake to the danger. It had just been reported that at a banquet in Cork Street the Prince, after inflammable speeches by Sheridan and Fox, had toasted the American Declaration of Independence, declaring himself that he sympathized with Chatham's cry in the House of Lords: "You cannot conquer America. If I were an American as I am an Englishman, while a foreign troop landed in my country I would never lay down my arms—never, never, never!"

The fact that the Prince was more than half drunk at the moment did not detract from the danger, to the Queen's mind, of such utterances being circulated in the country. Indeed, it drove the King, whose very reason was endangered by the loss of the American colonies, half frantic.

Lady Harcourt looked up at the Royal Standard fluttering over the Keep, and her eyes filled with tears—a sob half choked her. That young man—so much worth, so little worth. Good God, how strange was life, and what great results sprang from what pitiful causes. In her eyes Sheridan and Fox were monsters,—the Prince more or less a lamb for the fleecing in their robber hands,—their personal ends their only consideration. She was not so grotesquely wrong as it may seem. Personal ends certainly bolstered political conviction in both their minds and to dominate the Prince was a private need as well as a public duty—while as for him the flattery of two such minds was an insidious draught that daily encouraged him to confide in his own weak obstinacy and to foster such petty deceits as the Cumberland intimacy which he well knew Fox and Sheridan would view with almost as much alarm as the elder Court. But Sheridan would learn before all was done that a Prince, and such a Prince, is of the nature of the tiger-cat, all silky softness and charming playful ways and baby scratches that a man may

laugh at,—but a dangerous beast when tooth and claw are grown.

She left the carriage at the Queen's Lodge, and was shown straight to the Queen's dressing room, where her Majesty sat with her eldest daughter, the Princess Royal, standing behind her chair, a look of anxiety on her charming face, a sweet pink and white, set off by powdered curls and her simple laced gown of India muslin. The Princess of a fairy tale but for the cloud on her white brow. Prince Charming was anything but a source of happiness to his sisters, though the darker shades of the picture were not as yet intruded on them.

The world knows Queen Charlotte's face from the pictures of great artists. Not beautiful, not serene, but with a high impressive dignity which left beauty out of the question and made it irrelevant. A much suffering woman, heavily maligned by her son's brilliant courtiers, and not less by her son himself, she yet represented to the respectable part of the nation at that time something profoundly valuable in the national life. She had the great domestic virtues in perfection, and so far as her sway went the Royal household at Kew or Windsor set an example to every household in the land. She had more, a personal courage which nothing could daunt, to be exemplified later under cruel tests. Though not what would be called an intellectual woman, her reading was well chosen, and if she revolved it slowly she revolved it deeply and permitted it to influence her conduct. Religion was her deepest principle, exhibiting itself in a kind of formal piety which repelled those who had no spark of the same inspiration and therefore could ridicule it at their ease. A stately decorum, natural and developed into a kind of state armour by training and necessity, served as a protection even where she gave her confidence, but those who knew her best knew well how it was tempered with a

charming grace and sweetness, condescending still from Royal heights but as attractive as a sunbeam on a winter landscape. She wore a frilled dress with lace and lace neckerchief soberly crossed on the bosom.

"You are returned—you are tired," she said as Lady Harcourt curtseyed. "Surely you would a little rest prefer before we converse. Princess Royal, you may leave us now, and desire Mrs. Schwellenburg to see we are not interrupted. You are sure, Madam, you will not rest first? No? Then tea shall refresh you."

She spoke to the Princess in German, and the rest in fluent English, though with a marked German accent and a very occasional foreign idiom. She touched a little bell at her side as the Princess glided out. Miss Planta, a grave, middle-aged woman, entered with her deep obeisance and took the order, presently bringing in the silver tray herself. It contained also sugar, cream, and bread and butter and cake, which she offered first to her Majesty, with a napkin hung over her arm for the Royal fingers, and then, retiring, stood respectfully by the door. Lady Harcourt helped herself, still standing, for in the Queen's anxiety she had forgotten to give her permission to sit.

It appeared a domestic, happy scene enough, set in the rich decorations of the room with its air of dignified luxury, the dusk falling gently over the great trees in Windsor Park standing in a silence so deep that not even a leaf wafted. The garden perfumes breathed in at the open window, and the figures of the three ladies, the Queen seated in her great chair with her knitting fallen on her lap while Miss Planta served her with tea, and Lady Harcourt stood a little apart, were so elegant in their quiet grace as to be worthy the art of Gainsborough, then employed in painting the Princess Royal. But the interior differed very widely from the fair outside. There

all was perturbation, her Majesty in an agony of doubt and fear, Lady Harcourt so alarmed at her own errand that she could scarcely keep her feet, and Miss Planta, though unknowing the exact circumstances, possessed of quite enough information to lead her on the right track. Like all who served the Queen in intimacy, she loved and honoured her royal mistress, and as she gathered up the tea equipage and left the room, curtseying, her look was one of true compassion and sympathy.

The Queen roused herself as the door closed softly.

"My dear Lady Harcourt, be seated. Long since I should have bid you. Tell me in one brief word before you give particulars—have you had success?"

"Yes and no, Ma'am."

"You have the woman seen?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I was admitted instantly."

"And what impression have you? Bold, successful impudence?"

Lady Harcourt hesitated. The natural prejudice which she could escape no more than the Queen was strong upon her, but candour was stronger.

"Your Majesty will be surprised, but I know your judgment too strong to be offended when I say there was no triumph—no impudence. She seemed a young woman bowed down with fear and anxiety. Indeed, Ma'am, at one moment I feared she was about to swoon before me, so agitated were her feelings."

The Queen looked down at her beautiful, aging hands, loaded with great diamonds, her brows drawn together. The reply offended her sense of the fitness of things. There should be nothing but evil left in the triumphant harlot until awakened by the pangs of remorse, sharpened by a sense of religion,—when in a becoming poverty, there might be mercy for the Magdalen as for the murderer. To her mind such persons were hardly human.

"I can scarcely believe in any such sensibility from Mrs. Robinson!" she said coldly. "A woman who could her child desert to enjoy a life of prodigality and such expense as half ruins the Prince beside his own expenses—Spare me that, my dear Lady Harcourt, and remember she is an actress at the best. You are too good and candid yourself to fathom the arts of such persons. But what has exactly passed? I suppose the house is bedecked with reckless luxury."

"I was too agitated, Ma'am, to notice it in any way. The whole interview lasted but a few minutes. She is a beautiful young person, but as your Majesty has seen her on the stage I need say the less of that, except to add that in private life she has an elegance of appearance—a refinement which is far beyond expectation."

"It will certainly be wasted on George," the Queen said with concentrated bitterness. "If it so is one must wonder what the attraction could have been."

"Beauty, Ma'am, no doubt, and a very winning sweetness of manner. I fear I shall incur reproach by saying that her evident terror conciliated me more than I could have supposed possible."

The Queen looked her in the face.

"My dear Madam, though we may differ in opinion, I can never your goodness mistrust and I beg you tell me plainly all that passed, and your conclusions. That must I know."

"Then, Ma'am, I was favourably impressed. Believe me, she dreads Cumberland House as much as does your Majesty,—and well she may, for look at it how you will, a woman with any rag of decency left can't hope to hold her own if the Prince's opinions are directed from there. She heard what I said with the most dreadful agitation, and then stammered out in the deepest emotion, 'I beseech you to tell her Majesty that though unworthy of

her slightest consideration, I have a heart to feel this danger. I only learnt it last night and with terrors inexpressible, and all I can do—if anything—shall be done by her Majesty's most dutiful, unworthy subject. Oh, Madam,' she added, 'words fail me, but I entreat you to make this believable to her Majesty.' I am certain she meant what her words implied."

"You think it, you mean."

"Certainly, Ma'am, I think so. My belief is I surprised her in the agitation consequent on hearing of the Prince's intimacy at Cumberland House. Your Majesty may not be aware of it, but I have heard from my Lord that it is known in the town that the Duke made overtures to Mrs. Robinson before her engagement with his Royal Highness and was repulsed with contempt."

"Is that certainly true?"

"Absolutely, Ma'am, and therefore I think your Majesty will see she has strong reasons for dreading any connection there. At all events truth and earnestness were writ in her face—a very speaking one—when she talked with me. And I have her promise to let me know if she sees anything that could be profitably done to break off the intimacy. Naturally I made the interview short. I feared any interruption and—"

"If the Prince knows of it it will be fatal," said the Queen calmly. "Otherwise my intervention may possibly be of service."

This was crucial. Lady Harcourt, the blood falling away from her face like sand from an hour-glass, took her courage in both hands. Not knowing what the consequence of the whole matter might be, she dared not take the responsibility of concealing anything.

"Most unfortunately, Ma'am, his Royal Highness entered before I left—"

The Queen half started up, pale as death, her hands

grasping the arms of her chair until the knuckles and veins stood out on them.

"What? He has seen you?"

"Impossible to avoid it, Ma'am. He was in the room before I was aware. Not a word passed. I curtseyed, he bowed, and with all his own courtesy he armed me down to the carriage, and then returned upstairs. What he thought I cannot tell."

"But I can," said the Queen.

"May it not alarm him for his good? He may think it an intervention of his Majesty's," Lady Harcourt said mournfully. The mother's strained self-control pulled at her very heart-strings. And the Queen's pride awed her.

"I think not!" says the Queen. "I know the Prince. It will increase the suspicions with which he is fed daily by those abandoned wretches. We have but ruined the young woman, my good Lady Harcourt, and so broken our own weapon and done no use to ourselves. Not that I can deplore the ceasing of such a connection in itself, but if succeeded by Mrs. Elliott and the influence of the woman who is called Duchess of Cumberland, we go from bad to worse."

Lady Harcourt could say no more, so black was the outlook, and the cruel prospect of years of sordid dissension between his Majesty and the Prince had already so unnerved the Queen that with so little comfort to offer, silence was best. She kissed the royal hand with tenderest sympathy and ventured not a word, the Queen averting her haggard face as the tears rolled down it.

But they were quickly checked. With a light knock at the door and a hastily dropped curtsey the Princess Royal ran in.

"Mamma, Papa is coming. Tears?—Oh, my dear—What has troubled you?"

She dropped on one knee before her mother and with her own handkerchief dried her wet eyes most tenderly, then sprang up again.

"I'll delay him a moment, mamma. That will give you time."

She glided swiftly away, and they heard her clear voice in the corridor.

"Papa—stay one minute. Look at Badine. I put this bit of biscuit on her nose and say, 'Hip, hip, hip!' Not a move. You see—stiff as wax! And then I say 'Hurrah!' and up flies the biscuit in the air and she catches it in a bound. Isn't it pretty? The little clever darling!"

They heard the girl's laughter clear as crystal.

"You want to see it again, dear Papa, don't you?"

Lady Harcourt flew for a wet handkerchief to bathe the wet eyes and haggard cheeks, and when the King entered and the Queen rose to curtsey there was a sunlight smile to greet him, so calmly cheerful that none could have imagined the storm which had passed.

"No, my good Lady Harcourt, no wax lights yet. My eyes are tired with reading. She has been in London for two days, your Majesty, and brings us all the latest tattle and Dr. Burney's duty, and he has a new volume of the 'History of Music' for to lay before you?"

"What—what—what? More music? Burney is a sensible understanding fellow and deserves patronage. Sit down, Lady Harcourt. And what was the news in town? Was you at the opera? No—no—no! Your musical taste is too solid. Handel for you as for me. Manners tells me Mrs. Sheridan gave a Sunday *soirée* (can't approve Sunday racket however) when she indulged the company with music from the Oratorio most heavenly sung. What, what—did any one ever hear such a voice! 'Let the bright seraphim in burning row.'—Can't forget

it! I vow that young woman looked and sang most angelically. 'Tis the loss of the age that she married that dissolute brute Sheridan, who has deprived the public of its most brilliant ornament and is dragging her to perdition with companions to whose company he never should have been admitted. What—what—what!—a player fellow, a mere manager of a playhouse to be the companion of Princes, to draw them into his low haunts of vice with the basest flattery."

The stout florid King, kindness and benevolence itself when at ease, was purple with fury now, storming on in the high monotonous voice that the Queen dreaded beyond anything earthly. It filled her mind with dim mysterious terrors, and the worst was that, as now, no one could tell what innocent subject might launch him on that most dangerous one of the Prince's aberrations.

"What—what? And that coarse-mouthed brute Fox, with his foul linen and fouler language. When I think he's the son of Lord Holland, who might have supposed his son would be a gentleman, I can only pity and sympathize. I have my own troubles as is well known, but they shall never close my heart to sympathy for others in like case. No, never. What—what! When a man ceases to sympathize—"

The Princess timidly ventured to draw the King's attention to the little trembling Badine. But he raged on over the accursed names of Sheridan and Fox until the Queen, smiling faintly, pleaded Lady Harcourt's fatigue and a headache of her own, and at last the King went off, still declaiming, to play backgammon with one of his equerries. The charming Princess followed with anxious back-cast looks at her mother, and then the Queen fell back exhausted in her chair, speechless with agitation. Lady Harcourt kissed her hand with tears.

"My very dear Mistress, have courage!" she said.

"'Tis known to your piety that the Almighty does not forsake those who trust him, and surely I know that your Majesty's trust is, as it has need to be, founded on a rock. See the Prince once more and speak with him yourself. Surely it must move him."

The Queen feebly signed her gratitude and Lady Harcourt left her reluctantly, a tragic figure, sitting staring out into the darkened trees with eyes that saw nothing but woe and desolation.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SNARE

The Prince, meanwhile, was telling his tale in the sympathetic precincts of Cumberland House to his gross uncle.

Storming and raging, flushed with drink and fury, the young man stood by the great carved mantel pouring out his grievances against their Majesties and their spy he had nourished in his bosom. 'Twas a mixed metaphor, but he weighed not his words.

"What did I tell you, Sir?" says the Duke, smiling superior through the blotches of his coarse features. "Did I not warn you the fair prude was an emissary of their Majesties? Has not yourself told us that unlike a happy young woman that may bless her stars to be the chosen of the most admired man in Europe, she pulls a long face in private and ventures on a kind of impertinent superiority to what pleases your Royal Highness? Would she dare that if she had not support behind her you're not aware of? I suspected this always but I need say no more now; 'tis proved to admiration."

"Proved! If I had seen the Queen herself sitting there cheek by jowl with my mistress it could not be more proved. I told her it ended all between us."

"So it should with any man with spirit! What! We are not to be tied in nursery leading strings when we are men! I taught my mother, the Princess of Wales, that lesson early enough. And there is more, Sir. You should not be in the hands of an actress come from Heaven

knows where. We know these women of the stage. A lady of birth and family is the fittest companion for you, and if to that is joined the tenderest heart, the gayest, liveliest humour in Christendom and a passion for yourself—"

"You mean Grace Elliott?" says the Prince, side-glancing at the Dresden mirror that reflected his handsome face. "But I declare to you, Sir, I think myself a man that would tire of Beauty's self if I were bound to her and her only, and a woman of fashion might expect fidelity I can by no means promise."

"Grace Elliott? Who could expect the impossible from a man in your position? You speak but as any candid man who knows the world must speak. Try her! And as for Perdita—*Aus ist das Lied!* as my father said when he dismissed Miss Vane. And the sooner the better. Has it not occurred to you, Sir, that Sheridan was too frequent in his visits to Newman Street before she made her mark and 'tis known that the shortest road to success on the stage is through the manager's heart? I have heard also that Essex is constantly with her."

The Prince shook his head; whatever might have leaped out in his fury with Perdita these insinuations did not trouble him. He was far too well assured of his own potent attractions. Was it likely, even if she were willing, that Sheridan or Essex would dare? Do not jackals draw back when the lion is moving, and Sheridan as well as Essex had been his jackals in more than this.

"No, Sir," says he, "I am not alarmed on that score. Far from it. As a matter of fact I know from herself and from other sources that she refused great offers before she came into my hands. Some of the greatest offers in London. I have no reason to suspect her there."

The Duke's face purpled. Could it be possible the woman had told the Prince— Could he have guessed?

No, he went on easily, his legs crossed, a glittering snuff-box in his swinging right hand, his thoughts fixed on his irresistible self—and on no other.

"No—I don't describe her as a mercenary woman. Great expense almost frightens her, or did till she grew accustomed. She loves jewels—as every pretty woman must, yet doesn't grasp at them. To sum up, she's desperately in love with me. I can wind her about my finger."

"Yet spies for your enemies!" says the Duke, dextrously recalling the conversation to its starting-point. "For my part, knowing the world and the machinations of my brother, the King, I should be disposed to say—Look in Mrs. Perdita's treasure hoards and see whether there isn't some large unaccountable sum lately come into her possession. A spy, and she's that without question, never works without a greased palm. Well, it will give you the less expense when you send her about her business. Of course you are decided to do it immediately?"

When there was the least suspicion of coercion the Prince's ears went back like a mule's. He scented it now.

"My mind is not made up. I shall inquire into the matter further before I decide."

"You can't be too quick," the Duke said incautiously. "It turns a man sick to know his every unguarded word and action reported to his enemies. I advise you, Sir, speak plain and be done with it."

The Prince laughed carelessly. His fury was rolling away like clouds. His nature was callous to any impression whether of anger or love. Nothing lasted but the warm eternal beams of egoism.

"It turns a man sicker to be advised about his own business when he doesn't seek advice. No, Sir—*that* is not the commodity I seek from yourself and my charming

aunt, and I should have kept the little incident to myself, only I knew it would amuse you to see how they try to keep me in leading strings still. Trust me to look out for my own interests."

"I do. God knows any man that doesn't is a damned fool. Well, say no more. Here comes the Duchess."

The big folding door pushed open to give passage to the charming lady who had won a wedding ring from the grossest sensualist in Europe. Her success had astounded herself scarcely less than the amazed public—and she bore the mark of that surprise at her own arrival in a little forced ease and restlessness of manner which had by no means the true royal ring of flawless superiority. The endeavour to please, to be popular, was a little too evident, too much bowing and smiling and ingratiation with the public when the Great Unwashed condescended to notice her carriage. It must be allowed, however, that it was difficult for any woman to make headway against such universal detestation and contempt as her husband excited in every decent mind.

She stood now with either hand against the opening of the folding doors, nymph-like and slender in a long trailing dress of gleaming white without any hoop, her golden-auburn hair piled over a cushion and a curl or two above her ears. The mass of hair gave her small softly coloured face, tapering to a lovely little chin, an inexpressible air of impish delicacy as of a flower-fairy peeping out of petalled recesses with a smile half roguish, half evil. Her eyes were amazingly beautiful, deep pools of liquid green, like water reflecting forest glooms and sunshine. They sparkled in the celebrated lashes at the present moment.

"George!" she said with winning impertinence—except his parents, very few ventured on the Christian name—"George!—And so early! Why, I thought you only came here with the bats. To what are we indebted— No, you

needn't kiss my hand. We are not on ceremony, you and I. Sit down, my dear nephew, and tell me what makes you so flushed and handsome to-day?"

"Don't I always look the same, aunt?" says he, straightening himself to the compliment and twinkling to the title he gave the lady.

"Not always *flushed*, Sir." She marked the word prettily and shot a demure glance from under the drowning lashes. "Grace Elliott was with me but now, and if you had heard— But no. Discreet aunts do but tell their nephews what's for the good of their souls."

He leaned over her chair caressingly. The warm scent of her hair dilated his nostrils. No other woman had that especial perfume or used it so delicately.

"Madame, ma tante, je vous—"

"No, no, an English Prince must speak English, or stay!—I indulge you in Welsh, since you are Prince of Wales. You want to know what Grace said? Well, you shall not. Ladies' secrets are secrets, and especially to a man tied to the next prettiest woman in London!"

"Tied! No one shall tie me!" he cried, starting upright. "It's the devil's own plague a man can't form a liaison without all the world looking on him as good as married. And if—"

The Duke interrupted blandly.

"I am sure my wife would agree with me, Sir, that tied or no you show a most uncommon chivalry to a woman who little deserves it. I'll be said by the Duchess if you give me leave to open the matter."

"Certainly. I've nothing to hide, and I sought her opinion myself. One woman is a good judge of another—'Set a thief'—you know! A thief of hearts, of course, is understood."

He pulled forward a chair, and threw himself negligently into it,—the rich stuff of his coat sticking out

stiffly on either side, and his handsome silk-clad legs stretched out before him. So seated he had an almost ludicrous resemblance to the bored indolent bridegroom in Hogarth's "Marriage,"—the face shallow and set on small inward thoughts hardly clear to himself. His wrath had blown over,—only the Duke affected a mighty show of it in relating the story to his eager Duchess.

"Such conduct in return for the most generous treatment she has had will shock you, my love, I know. It must have been perfectly plain to Mrs. Robinson that to intrigue with the Court was to expose the Prince to every sort of attack, and yet—you see! After all, what can you expect from an actress? That sort of *canaille* is untrustworthy to the last drop of their blood. Damme, if I don't believe they can't tell the truth if they try. What do you say, Madam?"

She swept up the lashes superbly.

"Why, Sir, I can't possibly affect surprise. Miss Propriety Prue has been playing a deep game for a long time, if not from the beginning. I have it from one who *knows*. Depend upon it she has been providing for herself against the inevitable change. What, isn't it a proverb that there's always meat in the hawk's nest, and Miss Propriety is a hawk, though of the demure type that's the most dangerous of any. But how base, too, of the Queen to tamper with her! The Queen of England to lower herself to a—"

The Prince stared down at his legs and said nothing. He might criticize his parents himself and certainly did not spare them, but it still tingled a little when others had the audacity. Swift as a flash she saw and changed her course.

"My reverence for her Majesty's great position fights against my affection for you, Sir. It shall not be worsted. Let us speak of her Majesty no more. But is not this

woman a danger? I should reckon her one. You should rid yourself of her."

"That is for me!" the Prince said, very stiffly, and got up rigid German fashion with a bow from the waist. "I must go now, and I thank you both for sympathy in my affairs. I must consider my best course and later on will let you know my decision. Have you company here to-night for cards, Madam?"

"Certainly, Sir, and Grace Elliott will bring her guitar and give us Spanish serenades. We hope to see you, unless indeed this leak to the Court should—"

She hesitated with a charming anxiety and deprecation, little jewelled hands spread out as if half afraid. That was the right touch. The Prince unbent instantly.

"If the Court or any one in it thinks that I'm to be hampered in the choice of my friends all I can say is that person will find herself very far in the wrong!" he said haughtily. "You'll find me here, Madam, at the usual hour. And pray don't let your solicitude alarm itself. I hope I can hold my own with man or woman."

They were full of assurance—the Duchess's so charmingly given that he stooped and kissed her hand again. So little, so white a hand! Who could suppose it could drive a dart as venomed as a poisoned stiletto!

The Prince drove straight to Sheridan's house in Bruton Street, knowing that after a night's roistering he might count on his being moored in Blanket Bay, as he called his bed. Elizabeth was arranging bow-pots in view of a *soirée* that evening and dropped her flowers and her startled curtsey at the same instant. The Prince went down on his knees in spite of remonstrances and gathered up the armful. Her starry presence had always a softening influence upon him, and indeed at this time of his life this young man could hardly have been known for the same in Mrs. Sheridan's and the Duchess of Cumber-

land's presence—while as for Perdita— But indeed there are few men who do not take their colour from women, from the cradle to the coffin, and those who do not have loss as well as gain to reckon with.

"I disturb you, Madam, and can't forgive myself, but can I see Richard on a matter of importance? I hadn't come else."

"Why, Sir, he's in bed, to be honest with you!" says Elizabeth, surveying him, half frightened, over her hedge of flowers. "He was up so late last night—"

"Who should know that better than I, Madam, though I wasn't there myself. I know he was with Charles, and they were discussing— Oh, I know your discretion, so I may whisper it. A tremendous secret. Put your ear close!"

She did so, rather unwillingly, and with lips that purposely brushed that charming ear, he whispered:

"We talk of Richard's standing for Westminster. 'Tis the beginning of a great career for him. But silence, on your life!"

She drew back in wide-eyed alarm.

"Oh, Sir—your Royal Highness don't consider, indeed, you don't! Parliament's an amusement for rich men. He couldn't—we couldn't afford it. Oh, pray, pray don't suggest it. Forgive me, but it alarms me dreadfully."

Indeed she had turned quite pale, and her eyes were two woful stars in mist.

He laughed outright at her fears.

"But indeed you don't consider as you should, Madam. To be a member of Parliament is the high road to office, and with Richard's abilities what is there he mayn't pretend to? The mischief is that you undervalue his abilities."

She shook her head with a faint smile.

"But yes, yes! I saw Lord Holland yesterday with

Charles, and I'll tell you his exact words, for you'll own him a judge. 'As for Dick Sheridan, he's as certainly marked for a future Cabinet as that I stand here. Not a requisite is lacking, eloquence, sagacity, wit, urbanity and—' Well, I forget the rest, Madam, but I know 'twas a string as long as from here to Cork Street. Every one but yourself knows it."

Elizabeth was dumb. Yes, she knew it as well as any, but knew also that if the warp of his character was ideal, there was that in the woof which fatally knotted and tangled the other. His very virtues, possibly piled a little high-flown, toppled over into disaster. His vices—he could no more restrain himself from a dash after any alluring will-o'-the-wisp than he could help seeing its glitter. His eloquence—who could deny that tissue of music and fire?—and yet, yet, to her instructed ear there was a dash of bosh in it too, a strain of insincerity—sentimental perhaps but false in grain. An ineffectual angel with the fatal gift of luring others to follow him into the blind alleys of life, and there leaving them with a jest—not heartless, but hopeless. Politics!—they would be his ruin! She wished most passionately at that moment that they had never seen the Prince. There were likenesses in him to Sheridan which frightened her. The same facility of impulse, the same propensity to say far finer things than he really felt, the same passion to buy popularity at a cost he would never pay when the day of reckoning arrived. Morally as well as practically both drew bills on the future which they could not honour. And in addition, Sheridan had all the doomed versatility of the Irishman which prevents any concentration on the serious practical requisitions of life.

She felt it a most disastrous alliance, and the more so for the inequality in rank which made every step a danger.

Her face was so sad that the Prince rallied her gaily.

"I know your thoughts, Madam, as well as if you sang them in one of your own fascinating trills. You're afraid Richard will drink too much wine in company with Charles and your humble servant. Well, now, you shall hear the truth. What we drink is as nothing—nothing, mark you, compared to the seasoned topers. The night before last we had each but two bottles of light claret, and a Jeroboam of port between us. Now what's that, when all's said and done? And we chewing tobacco all the time which takes off the effect of the wine. A child could carry as much!"

She tried to laugh.

"Isn't a Jeroboam six ordinary bottles, Sir?"

"Well—what if it is, we didn't finish it all. The Duke of Cleveland has his glasses made without a foot, so that you must swill off a glass at a draught. I don't approve there. A touch of vulgarity. Hark! I hear Dick stirring. I'll run up."

Before she could say a word he was off and up the stairs to Sheridan's bedroom. Elizabeth reflected with alarm that she had left her dressing-gown and slippers lying about,—but there was nothing to be done except to go on with the flowers. It gave an additional distaste, however, to the whole matter. Even her house was not her own nowadays. Alas for dear Burnham!

The Prince, now in a very much better temper, stormed into the room, where Sheridan, propped comfortably on pillows, was reading a manuscript, a crumpled newspaper beside him. It is difficult to receive Royalty ceremoniously in such circumstances, but this Royalty was all familiarity, and flung himself in the armchair beside the bed with long legs stretched out in his favourite attitude.

"Don't mind me, Richard, I knew you would be in the

downy, but I couldn't wait. A damned nasty ill-smelling incident. That's what brings me."

"If you'll give me ten minutes, Sir, I'll get on my clothes and be with your Royal Highness more suitably. Allow me—"

"My Royal Highness doesn't care a damn whether you've a nightcap or a wig on your head, Dick. What I want is your opinion. Now listen—and don't trouble about yourself. Stay—is that a bottle of brandy? I'll have a sip before I begin."

The scene had its comic side in Sheridan's excessive discomfort at the invasion, often to be repeated in future years. He ran his fingers through his tousle of hair, however, and put the best face he could on it and the Prince told his story.

It not only startled Sheridan that the Prince should have come to him in the matter, but placed him in a very grave difficulty. Evidently Perdita had not mentioned his part in it, but he had no especial reliance on her discretion, and who could foresee the future? It would damn him with the Prince if it got out. All the time he was apparently listening his mind was shooting to and fro, swift as a weaver's shuttle over the possibilities and dangers. His whole future career hung upon it, and now that his life in high society was detaching him more and more from the theatre and from authorship the Prince's favour was of terrible moment.

"I know the King and Queen capable of any meanness where I am concerned, but to use my own mistress as a spy is a flight beyond anything I ever imagined. And that she should betray me—"

Sheridan's mind was working more smoothly now. He looked gravely at the Prince, who had lashed himself into a crimson fury with the mere recital of his wrongs.

"I don't read the occurrence, Sir, as your Royal Highness does. I may be mistaken, but since you ask my opinion—"

"I do. What else am I here for? But I see no other way."

"Why, Sir, in these matters 'tis an invaluable trick to put yourself in the enemy's skin and argue from within instead of from appearance. Come to consider it, their Majesties don't need to use Perdita for a spy, and risk a rebuff that they would know must reach your Royal Highness's ears. She would not betray you either for all the diamonds in Golconda. And don't you suppose that they're well served in spies! I would swear they know every one of your goings and comings better far than she. No—no. But we're hot on the scent. If there was anything your Royal Highness was doing in which they might hope her influence would deter you—Now, is there any such thing?"

"Nothing at all. What should there be?" The Prince was looking uncomfortable.

Sheridan pulled himself up into a sitting position and looked straight at him.

"Sir, I am the most faithful of your servants, and I'll take the risk of telling you what I've heard. Have I your leave?"

"Why, yes—if you want to talk damned nonsense."

"Well, Sir, it's beginning to be rumoured about that you were honouring Cumberland House with your presence. I can't suppose it true—"

"It's a damned lie," interrupted the Prince.

"I thought so. I was sure so. I denied it with indignation. I know your Royal Highness has far too much wisdom to ally yourself with the best-hated, most despised man in the Three Kingdoms. It would damage you frightfully."

"By God, is he that?"

"To the full. But to return. Depend on it this rumour has reached their Majesties, and no wonder it frightens them, not from the point of safeguarding your morals: for they know very well you are out of leading strings, but because they know as I do, as every thinking person does, that to be allied with Cumberland House is to be distrusted and despised throughout the nation. Even a man of your immense popularity can't afford that!"

"You really believe that was the errand?" Even the Prince was startled.

"Indeed I do. What else? And I who differ so completely from their Majesties make bold to say they were perfectly right in this case. Let me tell you—"

And here Sheridan gave a swift and lucid exposition of a chapter or two in the Duke's history, as yet unknown to his nephew.

"You can't afford—no, not even you, Sir—to touch such pitch. The nation don't object to your enjoying yourself legitimately, but it rightly objects to that sort of beastliness, and their Majesties know it."

"Then they should have written to me." The Prince was half convinced, and Sheridan pressed his advantage.

"I own it a mistake in manners, Sir, but that can be excused. How did Mrs. Robinson explain herself?"

Again the Prince looked uncomfortable.

"She had no opportunity. I was damned angry, Sheridan. I spoke my mind."

"Ah, Sir, your anger would terrify the poor soul. She loves you fondly. Go home and soothe her and get the truth, and I wager my immortal soul it's as I have said."

A pause. Then very seriously Sheridan added:

"It would be the devil's own business if this got wind at Cumberland House."

Dead silence. With the tail of his eye he saw scarlet flush the royal cheek, and knew exactly what had happened. He went on as if he had noticed nothing.

"To be in that man's hands—to have any secret he could tell—"

The young man started up.

"You croak like a raven, Dick. For God's sake have done. I don't care a damn for the Cumberlands, but if I wanted to see them I would if I rode through hell fire for it. Well—I'll go see the woman and if she's in the same story as you I'll forgive her this time. But if it happens again—!"

He had another sip of brandy and softened down into good humour and so gradually got himself out of the room and downstairs. Sheridan, for once, roused from his indolence, sprang out of bed and scribbled a letter in mad speed, and then dressing himself went off in search of Fox.

And the words with which he greeted him were these:

"Charles, what chance has the party of progress, with a man at the head of it who can't tell the truth if he tries—whose follies will so overweight the ship that we shall all be sunk to the bottom before we hoist sail! The Prince is hand and glove with Cumberland House, and every second thing he says is a lie."

Fox turned his coarse face unruffled on Sheridan's perturbed one.

"Why use him and uphold him for the honest man he never will be! The Heir to the Throne is a big Court card, Dick, and the hope of the nation is in him and with us. Never be misled by his soft nothings. Know him for what he is, and get the last ounce out of him for the country. He has the tact of fifty better men than himself, and that will carry us far. Now tell me the story."

And Sheridan buckled down to the task, little knowing that Fox had had every incident of it already from Mrs. Armstead.

Elizabeth trembled at home.

CHAPTER XIX

SUNSET

Perdita still lay in her darkened room, bruised and exhausted with emotion. Mrs. Armstead, hovering over her, reminded her of two or three engagements, but in vain.

"They matter nothing to me," was all she would say. "Leave me to myself."

To an ordinary maid this would have been sufficient, but their relations were not ordinary, and Mrs. Armstead had her own reasons for desiring knowledge. She knelt by the bed and very gently began drawing out the pins and unknotting the dark masses of hair that weighted the aching head, then turned the pillow and sprinkled essence of lavender to cool and sweeten it. Her fingers were soft as down and as soundless, and the first subsiding throb of pain brought gratitude, and a deluge of softer tears.

Mrs. Armstead said nothing, but still kneeling fanned cooler air to the hot temples and dried the tears with a certain calm gentleness which wooed confidence the more because it did not ask it. Perdita put her arm feebly about her neck.

"You pity me," she said with sobbing breath, "but how much more if you knew my sufferings! You once said that life never spared women. That was too true. It has found me out."

She lay a long while thus with Mrs. Armstead applying soft cold touches to her wearied temples, then told her story, avoiding all names—the Prince had misunderstood, had been angry because some unmentioned person had seemed to spy into his affairs—into his approaching Cum-

berland House. It was very easy to piece the threads together. In ten minutes the maid had complete control of the facts. She still said nothing, but her expressive hands went to and fro in the softest soothing. Afterwards Perdita believed they had half magnetized her—so great was her shame and anxiety at what she had revealed.

"I did not know he went to Cumberland House," she said, her breath catching. "Did you know?—and, oh, if you did, why not have told me? It would have spared me much."

"Madam, I did not know, and if I had, would it have been any use to disturb your peace? Is it likely that any one can control the Prince?"

"The woman he loves," sighed Perdita, then corrected the last word to "loved."

"No, Madam, no," the other said earnestly. "If you would but exert yourself there is time left yet. I could wish to see you brighter, gayer, more sparkling. That is the best advice a true friend can offer. He may be here to-night. Then sleep off this headache, and rise and let me make you beautiful, and be all love and forgiveness when he comes."

But Perdita shuddered. The very thought of meeting him made her quiver from head to heel. Some things he had said lay like serpents in her heart, poisonous, cold, coiling. Could she ever forget them?

Mrs. Armstead gently disengaged herself and glided to the door, returning with a sealed letter which she gave her mistress, drawing back the curtain and lighting a little lamp, for the room was shaded with darkness.

Sheridan had written thus:

"I believe his fury is over, and I have induced him to hear reason. You must tell him the *truth*, and, whatever your promise it is cancelled, for the mere sight of the messenger revealed all. I convinced him that it was a

natural movement of fear on the part of those who sent the message and laudable though unwisely contrived. You may turn this to account for all his friends if you act with discretion. Have courage. Destroy."

A shudder of hope sent the faint blood pulsing to her cheek as she read and held the paper in the flame of the lamp till the written part of it was black ash. Her next thought was alarm at her revelations to Mrs. Armstead, for the word "destroy" had quickened all her terrors. What madness had possessed her! She called her and said earnestly that she relied on her honour to mention no single word that had passed between them, and was a little reassured when the maid opened her eyes upon her in calm surprise.

"If you could suppose me guilty, Madam, of such an unworthy action I should be very little fit for such a position as I hold here. I do assure you I am as incapable of revealing a confidence as if I were a duchess."

The lamp was too low for Perdita to appreciate the irony of the smile which edged this remark. She composed herself to sleep, and Mrs. Armstead glided softly from the room and out of the house for half an hour to meet Fox and give him news of the quarrel. He was well instructed indeed in all that passed in Cork Street, but his point of view would certainly have surprised Mrs. Armstead if she had guessed it. She believed his ruling vice was ambition. There were women who could have told her better.

When Perdita awoke the headache was relieved, and as she sat before the mirror and studied her face she was relieved in mind also, for the storm had passed and left her no less lovely. She was pale, but that had always suited her air of distinction, and the shadowed under lids gave a mysterious softness to her drooping eyes. All the longing and supreme abandonment of love repulsed spoke

in the sorrowful curves of her lovely lips, and the weight of black silken hair falling in cascades over her shoulders and bosom completed the picture of sad submission that could struggle no more and so abandoned all to the mercy of the conqueror. The artist in her warmed to it even in the midst of her fear and pain.

"If Gainsborough could see me like this!" she thought, —and then, passing on. "But will *he* understand? His mind is so—so c—" She changed the word "coarse" to "cruel" internally. Not even yet could she confront the truth. And then, as sometimes befell her, a sad reverie seized her—a foretaste of sorrow to be and she sat with large eyes fixed on the shadows. If she won this struggle —what then? There would be another and another and the end must be drawing steadily near, and again—what then?

The theatre? Sheridan had assured her that was gone. She would be hissed off the stage. Then how could she live? Her husband, rejoiced to be rid of the last fetter, was established with a coarse seraglio somewhere in the purlieus of the town. Her mother—if she could support the child it would be as much as was possible. Then what awaited her? What were her weapons against the day of terror? A possibility that the Prince might honour the bond he had given her for £20,000—and, failing that, two weapons only—beauty and fashion; and the road they would hew out for her was indicated very clearly. She sat with her knees drawn up, her chin in her hand, and sombre rivers of hair flowing about her, and for a sickening moment stared into the eyes of Fate. Men. Yes—there would always be men. Lord Essex never looked at her without a covert question. General Tarleton—the handsome young soldier with his gay side-long glances. Manners, Russell,—many! She could not want for bread, even for luxury for—how long? Should

we say ten years? These men exacted so much beside the mere body of a woman. Her thoughts, hopes, all that was best in her. And also they must be humoured to the top of their bent in amusement. That meant that the woman who pleased them must plunge headlong into dissipation. She must spend her only capital, her good looks, on foolish eating and drinking, mad late hours, cards, dancing, frantic excitements. A nervous high-strung beauty like Perdita would soon tatter under that sort of life. It began to tell upon her already, she thought. Was not that a faint line drawn downward at the corner of her mouth? Men—men! Their callous cruelty! Did they ever think what a woman at their mercy must bear night and day without certainty or hope of peace? Never. Could she blame herself because she had stooped to folly? Was that the cause of their callousness? Did they treat the women they were supposed to respect any better? Not they! Her flying thoughts alighted on Sheridan. His wife—half angel and half bird, beautiful as the night with moon and stars, pure as the first dewdrop the sun exhales—what was her fate? Perdita knew very well. She could not live in the Prince's house and be ignorant that Sheridan valued fidelity to his wife as little as any man there. The Prince freely discussed with her, with loud laugh and jest, how Dick was kicking over the traces. With the lovely Amoret he was quite certainly in love, but even that did not safeguard the avenues of grosser passion; and what the Prince blurted out the other men of his circle hinted—and more—with a delighted grimace wrinkling the edges of their lips. Nay more, Perdita knew very well that with Sheridan's interest elsewhere, Elizabeth had to protect herself as best she could from pursuit. Yes, there was golden shame prepared for her as well as for Perdita—if she would accept it. Men thought of that deli-

cate purity as an allurement the more and valued it as negligently as her own sullied self. There was a little more lip-service—that was all—and if Elizabeth yielded the satyrs would trample her as surely with bruising hoof. Then what did it all matter? And what was a woman astray in a wilderness of men to do? Despise them, turn them to the best account and, later on, forget them and the bitter world that bred them. Perhaps at this moment Elizabeth was enduring her husband's embrace with the knowledge that his last kiss had been—whose? Was there nothing real, fixed, enduring anywhere, where she might cling? Nothing. Dream—illusion, a world—

"Where down their spectral dance for ever whirled
The shadow Grief pursues the shadow Love,
And neither real, and neither worth a tear,
To see dishonour pass,
Clasped hand in hand with honour, nor to care.
Both dreams alike, breathed on the clouded glass
Of fevered minds, and neither foul nor fair,
And nought at all but dream within a dream."

Her own presence grew awful to her, and as Mrs. Armstead tapped and came softly into the room she shrank down again into her pillows trembling from head to foot. Was this really the truth? Had she caught one devastating glimpse of a world of chaos where nothing mattered and blind chance was the only God?

"His Royal Highness has sent word by Mr. Baumgartner that he will be here at ten o'clock, Madam. It's half-past nine now. What will you wear?"

The revulsion of feeling thrilled her with physical sickness. She turned white as death and for a moment could say nothing. Mrs. Armstead bent over her.

"You're faint for want of food. Here, wait a moment. Lie still, Madam."

She ran for wine and forced her to drink it, talking cheerfully all the time.

"That will bring the colour back. We must make you a conquering beauty to-night. Trust me for that, Madam. It shall be a *negligée*—white satin and swansdown, and your beautiful hair loose. You shall be a snowdrop— Wait! Rest, while I get the brushes."

The wine revived her sufficiently for the toilette and Mrs. Armstead took possession of her, for she had not even the energy to speak. The brushes went softly in her hair, with a measured motion that soothed her into outward peace. She sat as if in a dream, her head leaning back while the costly flimsinesses, her armour for the encounter, were brought out and displayed. She had never felt a deeper sense of ruin than as she sat and looked at them, remembering the coarse insults the young man whom they were to inveigle had heaped upon her. For the first time she felt herself in mind as in body a courtesan—and yet, yet alas! with something in her also that stood apart unsullied, and weeping beheld her loss. That tortured her. If she could but take part with either of the selves that strove in her—cast it all aside and face her broken life and rebuild it nobly or subdue herself to what she worked in and be wholly the light woman in soul as in body, tamed in the palace-prison of the sensuous and the vile. She felt herself neither hell's prize nor heaven's and each alike dealt her its pang. The soul has its growing pains as the body.

When the toilette was finished she looked in the great mirror and beheld a triumph. Long folds of gleaming white satin fell straight to her feet—her throat, arms and bosom drifted with swansdown. Not a single jewel. Only the whiteness, and above it her small pale face

framed in cloudy hair breaking into the softness of little helpless tendrils, and knotted at the back to fall superbly far below the waist in wave and ripple like the sea in a heaving calm.

"I never saw you so handsome. You're like a lost Princess in a romance!" cried Mrs. Armstead, standing back with genuine delight to view the exquisite work of her hands—not only lovely in itself, but exquisitely fitting the part as she realized it. Jewels, bravura, would have been vulgarly out of place. This was perfection,—if only the hero were not too drunk to appreciate it!

She completed the picture by disposing Perdita on a great damask velvet couch in the dressing room,—a low table with her fan, handkerchief and water of lavender beside her. Then presumed on her triumph to advise.

"Close your eyes, Madam. Let him see you have suffered. But yet, when he repents, be forgiving and smile. For men one must always produce a smile, or they go elsewhere to get it."

She went out then and hung over the stair-rail to watch for the Prince's arrival, as genuinely concerned at that moment that all should succeed as if she would not have sacrificed Perdita and her every hope to her own ambitions.

He came, half an hour late, and in what mood he himself could scarcely tell, wavering between the warring counsels of the Cumberlands and Sheridan. It should be as Perdita behaved. If she thought proper to be submissive—why then! And, if not—why then, also, with a difference. He glanced into the empty drawing room and came on up the stair, extraordinarily handsome in a dove-coloured silk coat with white tambour-work waistcoat, and happily not drunk, only a little warmed with wine.

On the landing Mrs. Armstead intercepted him with a deep curtsey.

"Indeed, Sir, indeed your Royal Highness, Mrs. Robinson is extremely disordered. She passed from one swoon to another, and I sent for Dr. Heberden, judging it would be your wish. He prescribed a quieting draught and she to be kept alone. I know not—"

He stared at her.

"That cannot apply to me. I shall see her, of course."

He walked past her, and shut the dressing room door behind him.

There were only two dim silver lamps burning in the room, and she was a vaporous whiteness on the rich darkness of the couch and the great crimson silken pillows. He came as softly as he could over the deep-piled carpet, and dropped into the chair beside her, thinking her asleep. The lashes lay long and quiet, raying darkness on her cheek which seemed to have thinned visibly since he last saw her. Good God, the strange creatures women are, when a mere touch of fear and anger can thin them in a day! One can't touch them without leaving a bruise on their flesh, and yet—they will get so damnably in a man's way and must endure what they provoke.

As he looked, she said faintly, without opening her eyes:

"Forgive me, Sir. I am so weary that I cannot rise. No—I'll try."

She began to raise herself on her elbow, but he caught her and forced her gently back.

"Lie still, I tell you. What has happened to you?"

"I—I swooned, I think. I feared—"

"What?"

"That I should never have the chance to tell you I was innocent. *Then* your anger made me dumb. I could say nothing."

The faint silvery voice sounded cool and dream-like as

the drops of a distant bell through twilight. It soothed him. After all—this was a kind of home. A place where a man could be himself and have his own way and a beautiful submissive woman to do his pleasure. There was no fight in her. He could see that with half an eye.

"Tell me now. I want to hear the truth from you," he said, and laid his head on the cushion beside hers as he sat, the fair locks mingling with the dark ones. She could feel the warmth of his cheek, and a belated tenderness quickened in her heart. It would not be so difficult, not such a falsity as she had thought, to seem forgiving. She laid her hand feebly on his, and warmed to her part.

"Oh, my heart's joy, if you believed *I* could betray you, I would ask to die then and there. *I?* whose one thought is love. Let me tell you all—and surely you will believe."

"Tell me!" he said caressingly, just brushing the corner of her lips with his. If what she said agreed with Sheridan!

She curled round and nestled against his arm.

"My adored one, it was this. I was sitting, thinking of nothing less when my Lady Harcourt was shown up. She stayed perhaps ten minutes in all—I think not so much. She said that her Majesty—and the King (I think she implied) were terribly uneasy lest you should become the intimate of the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland. You may remember you and I had spoken of this, and indeed, my heart's idol, I have heard such terrible tales of them that though my pride would not have the Emperor of the world censure you, yet I could understand a mother's fears. The lady asked if I had any influence with you would I use it to open your eyes to the wickedness of that bad man! I disclaimed influence—sure, 'tis you who influence me in my every thought—but said I would do what I could. And as I said it, thinking only

of my beloved's good and glory, you came in, and oh—oh!"

Her voice broke in a sob, and he felt a stealing tear drop from her lashes to his. Exact to what Sheridan had supposed! Poor soul, he had chided her too roughly after all. He slid an arm beneath her shoulders and drew her to him.

"The poor Perdita! And was I so rough with my lady-bird! You would pardon, however, if you knew all I had endured from the spying of my father and mother. Their petty German intriguing in a free country like this—Good God, could I ever call my soul my own till I was twenty! But give me a kiss and it shall all be forgotten. Shall it, my beauty? It's like holding a warm snow-drift in a man's arms. Let me look into your eyes. If I see myself in them I shall know I am forgiven."

"Forgiven?" she said, clinging passionately to him. "No—I hate the word. You are loved—loved. If I had done what you thought, could anything you said be too bad for me? If I had died of it I should have known it was just. But I was innocent—I protest I was."

"You were, my white girl—my dear girl. Your soul is as white as this swansdown."

"And you love me?" she murmured in a pause between two kisses.

"Should I be here if not? Ah, you little know how I was pressed to stay away. Now I'll tell you,—a secret for that little pearly ear. I was going to Cumberland House to-night—to meet a woman who would tear you in pieces if she could. But I won't—I'll see her damned first. I'll stay here, and spend the night in my own Perdita's dear arms. This is home. I can trust you."

It was a heaven of reconciliation. It brought back the vanished first days of love. She wreathed herself about him, drawing his face to her bosom.

"And you'll never go to that dreadful house again, my heart's delight? Let them know they have failed, and the whole nation will rejoice. Promise. You don't know how all the people worship their Prince."

"I promise. On my honour. You are right. Much as I resent the Queen's interference I own her right there. I am done with Cumberland House."

Perdita glowed with delight—she had won for the mother as well as for herself—more, for the nation. What good there was in this young generous soul if she could rouse it. She! And the enthusiasm of the first days descended on her again—the belief that it was her work to guide him gently into the paths of goodness, and that her reward would be his reverence as well as love. She would so act as to deserve it. Who should dare call her a courtesan now? 'Twas the angel in her that must rejoice over this great achievement. For the moment she tasted a troubled peace.

They passed an evening of sweet domestic tranquillity, sliding into familiar talk of all the persons who had played a part in this great episode. With his arm about her he talked on.

"Sheridan—Dick's advice is always worth having—told me he was certain that Cumberland House was the secret of the matter. He said he was sure you had acted with propriety. Dick's a sound fellow—a valuable adviser for a man in my position. I shall constantly consult him."

"You could not do better. Ah, he did me justice. He has fine generous notions, and all I could wish is that he were more constant to his sweet wife. I know how you admire her, my Prince of Princes."

"Any man must. She's a complete beauty—and her singing—God bless me—what a charm it is both to look and hear. I never know whether she most delights my eyes or my ears. But for all that she's not quite the

angel you think her, Perdita. Edward Fitzgerald is hanging about her, and rumour says—well, she's a woman when all's said and done."

A cold pang shot through Perdita's heart. It came so terribly apposite to the thoughts that had tortured her.

"No—no! that could never be true. She's not that sort. I would never believe it. Who says so?"

"Every one and no one. You know the way of the world. But women are all alike. Suppose he caught her in his arms—like this!—and kissed her—like this! Then what? Eh, my charmer, my pretty, pretty Perdita! Would she resist? Will you?"

She yielded sighing. That night was hers and she tasted its trembling joy to the last drop.

The next she did not see him. He was at Cumberland House, and Fox knew it through Mrs. Armstead, but not she.

CHAPTER XX

DANGER

When he was gone next morning and she was left to the cold searching of daylight, Perdita knew she had secured a reprieve, and so, dismissing her own concerns for the moment, sat down to consider Elizabeth Sheridan. Somehow she had become to her the symbol of all she herself had lost,—and even more,—she was womanhood, a chaste moon sailing through clouds, stormy and perplexing often enough, but always with her own sweet radiance to guide her doubtful path. If that should be obscured— But it could not. Perdita never doubted that. She soared secure,—and yet her very security, her pure unconsciousness made it the more horrible that the Prince and the men of his set should jest about her as they jested at Grace Elliott—and many more. Something generous in Perdita revolted at this thought. She longed to warn her, to see those soft eyes flash lightning on the mere thought that any should dare to associate her with possibilities wholly outside her world of quiet thought and tender loves and self-surrenders.

"If I could see her—but how?" That was the question. In the old days how easy it would have been! A chair to her door,—light feet running up the stair, and Elizabeth advancing, all gentle cordiality.

"Perdita! Now you shall sit down, and see! I'll take your hat. Lord, what a fine one! Those feathers! You little prodigal! And shall I sing for you or you for me? But talk first! Tell me all the news."

Ah, those old days, now gone forever. She could take

a chair to the door still and steal up the stair, but how face Elizabeth's cold altered eyes when she met them. And all—all was changed. She knew the Sheridans were now in a constant racket of expense and confusion. They lived in Bruton Street. The very house was gone and so much else with it. What could she do? She might write and ask to see her, but it would be considered the grossest insolence, the more so as her errand could not be committed to paper. And even if an interview were granted, where could they meet in safety? Perdita's face was known all over London. She could go nowhere without the pointing finger, the greedy eye of lewd curiosity, —and Mrs. Sheridan's fair face was well enough known also. She could never be merely the famous Mr. Sheridan's wife—her singing and her distinction as a lady of high fashion gave her an eminence all her own, and the "diurnal prints" chronicled her goings and comings with flowers of speech reserved for the great.

As she sat, racking her brain, Mrs. Armstead came in with an armful of laces she had been pressing in her own room, and at the sight of her memory flashed her light on a forgotten clue.

"Did you not inform me not long since that you had seen Mrs. Sheridan driving somewhere? I forget the circumstance."

"Certainly, Madam. It was when I went to Richmond to visit my aunt. I saw her walking in the Park with my Lord Edward Fitzgerald."

"You are certain?"

"Lord, yes, Madam. How should I mistake? She wore a dress of white tabinet with a cloak of black satin, and a chip hat, black also with ostrich plumes."

"I see well you remember her dress," Perdita said with a little sarcasm, "but it is the lady herself I wish to be sure of."

She did not ask of Lord Edward. She knew the woman had seen him at her receptions in her actress days, and would not be mistaken there.

"I wish to know whether Mrs. Sheridan is in town—or where. Do you think you could ascertain this without naming me?"

"Certainly, Madam. Nothing easier. I am acquainted with her woman—Mrs. Simons. I can walk to Bruton Street this afternoon and take a dish of tea with her with your permission."

So the ostracism of a lady did not extend to her woman, and Mrs. Armstead could still be admitted within doors shut to her! Indeed her fine tales of the splendours of the Prince's mistress would enliven the housekeeper's room. Be sure of that!

She brought her report later.

"I saw Mrs. Simons, Madam. Mrs. Sheridan is staying at Richmond. What jewels shall I put out for the evening?"

The Prince was bringing Sheridan, Fox, Manners, Essex and Tarleton to dinner, and Perdita would sing for them afterwards. Tarleton was a born actor and it had been suggested they should go through a scene or two of some well-known plays before the cards set in with their usual severity. But her mind was busy on other thoughts than jewels.

"The pearls. Does Mrs. Sheridan go often to Richmond?"

"Reasonably often, Madam, Mrs. Simons said. She is the better for the fresh air."

Perdita descended, armed for conquest when the clatter of the dinner was over and the men had lounged into the drawing-room, and all, headed by the Prince, arose and bowed with ceremony as she came in. His bow was the most elegant in the world—even the Court of France

could not match it, and that, with the manners he could assume when he chose, had conferred upon him the title he prized only second to his princedom—that of the First Gentleman of Europe. Where the first gentleman did homage, all followed suit, and the bows were a bouquet offered to beauty, but there ceremony ended and good fellowship set in. She slid into a chair by Tarleton and Fox, and the talk went on, the Prince arguing with Sheridan, who seemed to have all knowledge at his finger tips, as to the respective merits of two strains of pointers. They were too far engrossed to heed anything going on in her corner.

"You have been driving to-day, Madam?" Tarleton asked, crossing his handsome legs before him indolently.

"No, Sir,—not I. I have been buried in a new novel by Lady Hawke, with the agreeable title of "The Mausoleum of Julia,"—and what the fashionable world can see in it, I can't conceive. Some praise it above Miss Burney's "Evelina," which astonishes me vastly. Have you favoured it?"

"Why, no. Novels are not much in my line nor sentiment neither. Does Julia end in her Mausoleum?"

"I am not there yet," says Perdita, dimpling. "I am but at the declaration of love, and that is elegant in the extreme."

"Lord, Madam, how does he do it? Give us a lesson. The Prince was saying at dinner that elegant manners were gone out with the rise of democratic notions and it should be his business to revive them."

"But not after Lady Hawke's pattern!" cried Perdita. "Listen to this." She took up the book from the gilded table by her. " 'If, when he made the declaration of his love, the sensibility that beamed in her eyes was felt in his heart, what pleasing sensations and soft alarms might not that tender avowal awaken!' " There's for you! Can

you match that? It's the strain of the whole book—all dying and sighing and languishing. You know Lord Hawke. Did she learn the style from him?"

Colonel Tarleton exploded.

"Lord Hawke—a red-faced burly bull of a man!—Soft alarms, tender avowals! God bless me, no! Charles, Lord Hawke—do you remember him at your rooms talking of Biddy Barker?"

Fox had been gazing at Perdita with those dark smouldering eyes under beetling brows which persuaded or subjugated most men and women who crossed his path. He had a peculiar way of sometimes fixing the person to whom he was speaking as if there were no other in the world at the moment and all his thoughts engaged in solving the problem of their being. Eye met eye and held it, even if the subject were slight.

"'Twas far from elegant, I'll own. But when there's not enough refinement to go round in a family 'tis best the lady should have the lion's share. Why, Mrs. Perdita, do you waste your time on this sad stuff—this dog's-eared trash that all the women consume now! You have a mind—else you couldn't have been the Juliet, the Widow Brady that held the town. You have a heart—(here he paused an almost imperceptible moment) and surely both require nourishment—or do you use the grave books merely to press your laces, as Richard says in his play?"

"Prescribe me a copy of reading, Mr. Fox," says she, parrying. Those fixed strange eyes of his always gave her a kind of discomfort that she could not explain. "I think of going to apartments at Richmond for a little fresh air when the Prince goes down presently to Belvoir to shoot. I might take a book with me for a companion."

"I disclaim that responsibility. A book is like a medi-

cine. Much depends on the constitution of the patient. Yours I judge a little tearful with a tendency to vapours and a pronounced sensibility. I would by no means abet these. A prescription of laughter, humour, and evenness of disposition (not of temper, you have that to admiration) is what the case demands. Avoid a diet of Richardson and all his followers as you would the devil. Make your regimen on Fielding and the laughing students of human nature who follow him. Have you ever read 'Tom Jones'?" She shook her head. "Read then, and if you blush a little over the fair Sophia and her muff, 'twill but improve your circulation and your knowledge of what men best love in your sex—a valuable piece of information. If you permit, I will send you the prescription made up before you go."

She bowed, smiling, to her doctor. It was the first time in that house that he had exceeded the coolest courtesy to her, though his heavy eyes watched her motions.

"Have the goodness to enlighten me, Sir. In a world made by men for men there can be little knowledge so valuable. What do they love best?"

"Madam, it is their opinion that the perfect woman should have no character whatever. She is to be a mirror, reflecting the moods of her master. But to that end she must keep her surface (no more) bright and polished, and if set in precious metals or their imitation (he pointed to the gorgeous gilt mirror above them) so much the better."

"And suppose an unfortunate woman to be born with a character?"

"Why, then, she must lose it with all expedition,—no double meaning, I assure you! Or hide it. How shall a man see his perfect reflection in the glass of her eyes

if there is any thought to sully it? Do not risk their brilliance by such a masculine exercise. Remember Pope's dictum:

" 'Most women have no character at all,—
Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
And best distinguished by black, brown or fair.' "

She caught the sidelong look of contempt which he threw at the Prince and was emboldened to say:

"Are not the lower animals enviable, Mr. Fox?—where the female can forage for herself without the male's support for herself and her offspring? What made women so different and so dependent? Was it the Almighty's doing or our own?"

He answered, smiling subtly:

"Now, what a question! But since you ask, I think, to be honest, it was the devil's, for with that weakness you master us, and where weakness masters strength by the backstairs method, why, then comes the world as we know it and the eternal duel between man and woman. We hate you, in truth, and you us, and the desire itself is but an outflash of sexual cruelty to show its true face later. And the victory is with us, for the feast of life is laid for us, and you have but what you can snatch or wheedle."

"Oh, true, true," she sighed. "My woman said the same t'other day. 'Life does not spare women. 'Tis the same for queen and beggar. . . .' "

"She said that?" he asked with some interest. "Probably she had reason? Do you know her story?"

"Not I. But she is one to reflect more than talk."

He was ready with another question, but the Prince intervened:

"I'm tired of talk. Sing, Madam, and then cards."

She rose obedient and gave them her famous song as the Widow Brady, amid a general regret that she could not give it in the original dress of breeches and silk stockings. "For indeed, Madam," says Tarleton, in her ear while the cards were dealing, "you were the gayest, prettiest young fellow that ever met my eyes or ever will."

She turned a repelling shoulder to him and rose. The cards were her signal of release. All rose and bowed again, punctilious, and Sheridan marshalled her to the door with a wordless question in his eye. She replied in a breath, "I took your counsel. All's well," as she curtseyed.

A week later, the Prince having gone down to Belvoir with Sheridan, she drove to Richmond to spend a few days with a friend of her mother's—a Mrs. Framlingham who had known and loved her from a child.

She had ascertained that Mrs. Sheridan was still at Richmond. Mrs. Armstead, the all-informed, brought the tidings unasked an hour after they arrived. Did she guess that Perdita had come there to seek a meeting? Who could tell? Her complexion, fine and fair as a privet-flower, never betrayed any emotion, and still less her deep eyes. She merely presented the fact and the address and turned to other matters.

The address was useless to Perdita. She could no more risk a rebuff in Richmond than in London. But, wrapped in her long satin cloak, furred, for the October breeze was fresh, she haunted as near the house as she dared, watching, watching. Once or twice she saw the fair face she knew at the window,—but that was all.

At last came the reward of patience—when, having all but given up hope of success, she walked herself in a long woodland alley of Richmond Park reading a letter from the Prince from Belvoir. He wrote her the maddest letters, full of gossip sufficient to set half the great houses

in the capital by the ears, caustic comments on the King and Queen and the doings of any people who stood well with them, bitter revilings of Pitt and his party—in short, matters which the Heir to the Crown should never have committed to paper if even for only his own eye. One of those letters falling into strange hands might, though but the sparks of indiscretion, kindle a raging fire of mischief. She folded and put it in her bosom at last, and looked about her.

A man and woman stood under some drooping boughs, red with the dying fire of autumn, at the end of the glade. Their backs were turned to her, and their own company made them heedless of all else. The man held the little lady-hand in his and bent over its owner in an attitude unmistakable—a lover, if ever there were one. The woman's head was drooped, as if she looked at the ground.

Perdita knew both very well, and instinctively turned to fly, her heart throbbing, confused and perplexed beyond measure. Not thus indeed would she meet Elizabeth Sheridan—it struck like a dart at her purpose. But dead sticks cracked under her foot and the man turned and saw her. He did not recognize her. There was only the vision of a retreating lady in a long cloak,—retreating evidently as thinking herself an intruder. He made a profound bow to his companion, who hurriedly waved him away and almost ran down the glade after Perdita, while he went off slowly.

The two women met face to face and it would be hard to say which was the paler and more agitated. The usual, the conventional, was dead between them for the moment. Elizabeth Sheridan spoke first, her speech so interrupted by her panting heart that it seemed she could scarce get the words out, as she laid one hand on the bough of a tree to support herself.

"I saw you. Why did you turn and fly as if I might dread to be seen? 'Twas no less than an insult. All the world may know my every action."

Perdita made a convulsive effort at self-control.

"If you will consider my position, Madam. You have not nor could take the smallest notice of me for some years. Judge if I must feel that when we were once friends. And now I meet you suddenly, and engaged with a gentleman— Oh, don't reproach me. What could I do?"

There was silence, the soft air fluttering the dying leaves. The two stood looking at one another, sad-eyed, across a gulf of memories and fears, each noting the change in the other. Elizabeth's beauty had taken a more spiritual cast—the large hazel eyes were larger and brighter in the thinness of her face, and as she slowly recovered composure, a hectic flush returned into her cheeks—a dangerous threatening loveliness new to Perdita. She looked a fair spirit but poised on earth for a moment, and winged already for return to her native skies. Her sweetness held the thoughts from all but herself, and the long cloak wrapped about her and her drooping hat were merely a background for the sensitive beauty that lay even more in personality than in feature. She thought Perdita much changed also. Setting aside the fashion and cost of her dress, it was scarcely the Perdita of Great Queen Street.

It is impossible a woman of her temperament should hold so strange and notorious a position, should meet such men and be thrown into the midst of such events, and that thought working from the inside outward should not change the expression and modify even the features. She had been a romantic sentimental girl, no more. Now she was a woman, thinking, fearing, grieving—more loving the right because she had forsaken it, even as a

woman may regret a lover whose worth she never knew until she had lost him. Reading this in her wistful look, Elizabeth instinctively drew a step nearer.

"Mrs. Robinson," she said, "believe me it has been a grief to me that we could not meet. My husband gave me your farewell message and told me you said you expected to see me no more. I thought it was your wish, but knew in any case it must be painful for us both to meet. Yet I would have you know this—you have not been forgotten in my—my prayers."

Perdita touched her gloved hand speechlessly. The wind sighed on in the rustling leaves. Again there was silence. It was Perdita who spoke next.

"My very dear Madam, let us not speak of me. I am not worth it, though my heart most gratefully feels your compassion. But since you honour me so far, let me discharge my debt of gratitude as best I can. I came down to Richmond in hopes of one word with you, written or spoken. May I speak it now? I tremble in doing so, believe me."

"Speak," said Elizabeth. "You can say nothing but what is fitting for us both. You are a good woman, whatever hard fate has made you."

That took the strength from the poor woman again, and she stood looking down with working mouth, and for a moment could say not a word. Elizabeth took her hand and held it softly in hers.

"Don't be so agitated, my dear. What is it?" she said.

It seemed a long time before Perdita could gather her words. At last:

"Madam, I know you to be an angel, but the world neither knows nor cares. I think it right to tell you that there are men whom I have heard speak jestingly of you in connection with my Lord Edward Fitzgerald.

They said you met him in secret. Need I tell you their foul talk? To you it cannot matter save only that whatever generous purpose you have had you may now think well to carry out otherwise. I wished much to see and tell you this, but my own position made it unfit I should ask you for a meeting."

Elizabeth looked calmly at her, still holding her hand.

"And you trust me, in spite of what you have just seen?"

"I would trust you, Madam, much sooner than my eyes. I ask no comment on what I have seen. I merely tell you what I have heard, and having done so ask permission to bid you farewell."

"No—but you shall not go like that. I thank you for your warning, dear Mrs. Robinson, and I will tell you the truth—which I trust to your own bosom, for I would tell no other, but you and I are sisters in sorrow—though our griefs are not the same. I think—I know, I may say my Lord loves me. Yet with a love so true, so honourable, as that his is the last company in the world in which I can take harm. And I love him—but with no thought that I need hide from my husband or all the world. You believe this?"

"With my heart and soul."

"But my life is very lonely. My husband is swept into the Prince's net, and what that is you know (she felt the shudder in Perdita's hand). Drink and cards and—and other society occupy him now, and he is but little at home and then very changed—so changed that our past life seems the dream of a vanished heaven. In my Lord Edward I find one whose heart is not set on such things but on a dream—I know not how possible—of serving his country. This he puts before all earthly—and since my heart too is set on a country—not this—but not very far out of reach for me—we

meet, and to him I unburden my heart and he to me. I know it not dangerous, I think it not wrong, and it has enabled me to support more griefs than I judge it right to tell you."

Her clear voice faltered a little at last, but she still looked steadfastly in Perdita's eyes.

"You blame me?"

The tears rushed to Perdita's eyes. She remembered what she had heard of Sheridan's amours from the Prince and though she had a sort of love for the man himself, founded on their strangely interwoven past, at that moment all the relations of men with women burnt in her soul like a shame. The world tricks such women of their heart's best, and gives them in exchange— What?

"Blame you?" she said, half weeping. "My dearest Madam, I honour you. But, oh, for your own sweet sake —for the sake of all women—don't imperil your good name, nor let the brute world trample it. You shine like a star—let no cloud obscure you. Not my Lord—not any man is worth it. It turns me sick that they should speak your name. Such men! Oh, Madam, if you did but know how I live and what I must see and hear!"

"My husband is one of them," Elizabeth said, sighing. "Oh, would that we had never seen the Prince. Our home is broken—all goes in waste and extravagance, and— But what use to talk. You have your own griefs and yet found time to think of me. How shall I thank you?"

The sky was blossoming to a faint rose of sunset after rain.

"It is time we went," she said, and they turned together and walked to the end of the glade where the great iron gates of the Park were but a few hundred yards distant. There, in the shadow of the trees, Perdita halted.

"I won't go a step farther. You must not be seen with me. We may never meet again—I think we shall

not, but I shall treasure this meeting in my heart to the last day I live. Dearest Madam, farewell."

They stood, looking gravely in each other's eyes, and for the last time Mrs. Sheridan spoke:

"I love my husband still. If ever you have the chance to say a word to send him back to me—remember this day and say it."

"I pledge you my word."

Another silence fell between them and then Elizabeth bent forward and kissed her on the cheek, still clasping her hand, then slowly drew herself away and passed out of sight.

Perdita stood there with the darkening trees about her. Life bore the features of the Sphinx and still with the torturing smile which compelled a woman to ask and ask—in vain. Could the true answer be that there was no answer at all?

CHAPTER XXI

THE SLIPPERY HEIGHTS

Sheridan had achieved the first step of his political ambition. He was member for Stafford, and had not increased his debts thereby, a partisan having found the necessary money to purchase the voters for the consideration of shares in the Opera House venture, and it was also reported that those incorruptible voters who would not take money took instead promises of places in the Drury Lane theatre.

His first speech in the House was a little hampered by nervousness, but his Irish bounce was not long in triumphing over such a folly, and we find Horace Walpole recording that "the young men in opposition made a considerable figure, particularly John Townshend and Sheridan, both intimates of Charles Fox."

Intimates indeed! The Prince could talk of nothing with as much glow as Sheridan's abilities in combination with Fox's. They must carry the world before them,—the world to his mind being at present chiefly concerned with his own debts and the enormous allowance he expected Parliament to sanction.

And this was but the beginning, for then came victory. The ruin of the British cause in America ruined Lord North's government with it, and Rockingham succeeded him as Prime Minister with Fox and his body-guard for lieutenants. The manager of Drury Lane became an Under-secretary of State, and the Fox-Hounds, as they were called, were in full cry.

Sheridan felt himself the man of the hour and reflected

privately that though Charles Fox was the real leader of the party of Reform at present the day would certainly come when more brilliant gifts such as his own could be trusted to obscure him. He had his little court of hangers-on, made his brother secretary for Ireland—an office carrying with it a pension of a thousand pounds, and distributed promises so glittering that even the company at Drury Lane began to entertain faint hopes of regular payment. But greater triumphs were in store. When Rockingham's ministry collapsed after four months and Shelburne's followed suit the coalition government was formed, and Sheridan stepped up as Secretary to the Treasury, huffed indeed because he was not Chancellor of the Exchequer, yet certain it must come.

Not a word, not a thought, was against the Prince! But for that friendship of the Arabian Nights, he had never played Abu Hassan to the Prince's Caliph, and the seats of the mighty had been as far beyond his reach as Mount Chimborazo. Yet he had no real ease. The constant fluctuations of political triumph wearied and unnerved him, and for the strife itself he had far less zest than Fox. It was the prizes which appealed to him. The triumphs at Devonshire House, where the charming Duchess, who had once objected to know him as "a mere player," now could not do enough to show her admiration and affection, and coaxed him with pretty pet names and softest flatteries. She called him Chéri, using the nickname his wife was dropping a little nowadays. She was his T. L.—a subtlety not to be deciphered by the outer world, but meaning infinite confidence and friendship. Next to Fox he was the hope of her party, and to the Duchess party politics were the very wine of life. He was at home at Chatsworth. His pranks and freaks were wit incarnate there, and those who could not relish them might stay away. He and Elizabeth, whose beauty

triumphed everywhere, were the most noted couple in England at the moment, and they slid, easily enough on Sheridan's side, into the fashionable detachment of married couples, visiting more apart than together, and both pursuing their own amusements. But there was debt, debt, debt, though his public position saved him from the fear of arrest as a debtor.

And she—how could she keep her expenses within bounds? It was impossible. It was the fashion to dress deliciously, and she, with her beauty and her husband's state to keep up,—how could she do less than others? Her starry beauty shone in tiffany and tissue, and since, in spite of the romances, beauty is bettered by going beautifully, men who had noted Mrs. Sheridan as exquisite before, now found her adorable also. She was the fashion of fashions—entreated for a glance as a goddess, entreated for a song as a Muse. She made even virtue fashionable for a time, though that fashion passed as quickly as the rest.

But the roses wore prickly spines. She was obliged to countenance the lovely Amoret, whatever her private feelings, for Amoret was a political power, the bright particular twin star (with the Duchess of Devonshire, of Fox's party), and since Sheridan hoped to climb, no ladder, however abhorrent to his wife, must be displaced.

Elizabeth stayed at Crewe Hall and smiled to the necessary degree on Mrs. Crewe, and submitted ruefully enough to play cards with her small skill with the great ladies and gentlemen to whom a guinea was less than a penny to her. She wrote in her own little language to Sheridan enjoying himself at Chatsworth with the dominant Duchess and her sister Lady Bessborough, besides a houseful of guests of the gayest:

"Oh, my own, 'ee can't think how they beat me every

night! If it goes on I shall soon be on the debtor's side of Mrs. Crewe's book. It is the abominable whist they make me play—twenty-one guineas last night and fifty before. I tell you this that you may provide accordingly, for I very much fear you will find no little hoard here when you come. But, my soul, when do you come? Woodcocks are so plenty here you may knock them down with your hat. Well, God thee bless. Your own."

The money question did not vex him. It would have been better for both if it had vexed him more, but there was a nearer point than that—he could not get the image of Edward Fitzgerald out of his mind, and he was at Crewe Hall also. Possibly Amoret was not unwilling that Mrs. Sheridan should have her own interests. He hinted at a suspicion to Elizabeth and she answered, again in her little language, like Swift's, but how infinitely more tender!

"Me only vex that you should ever fret yourself and be unhappy without the shadow of a cause, and indeed, my heart's own, I will do or not do anything to make 'ee happy, but if you have confidence in me you will not wish to make me do anything remarkable or studiously avoid every person whose society happens to be more agreeable to me."

And with this gentle protest she remained faithful to her friendship with Lord Edward. Why, indeed, should she part with a solace in what was becoming a very great loneliness? She filled it up with the necessary gaiety and perhaps a little over, and her sister-in-law wrote:

"Indeed, the life she leads would kill a horse, but she says she must do as other people do."

The writer very well knew why, for the world knew as well as Elizabeth herself how Sheridan's heart had strayed, and if that were so, then she must imitate other unhappy women and cover her grief with laughter. But

it wore her inexpressibly. She had not the health or the nature for it—her true interests lay far away from the drinking bouts and practical jokes of Chatsworth and Crewe Hall, and sports which appeared very elegant and dashing to the great ladies revolted her exquisiteness however bravely she played her part. On her the blight of the Prince's friendship had fallen as on her husband and Perdita. As a friend of his said to Sheridan, "It needs a front of brass and the constitution of an ox to keep up with him." And she had neither.

Yet without any guardianship from her husband she held herself from falling in the mire that soiled her fair feet. Many men made love to her, and because to be Puritanical in the world she lived in is to have done with it, she did not repulse them, but acquired a charming art, all her own, of gently persuading and cajoling them into friendship instead. She sang to them, smiled on them, softly flattered them into it and before they knew where they were a lover's pretensions seemed absurd, and to talk by the hour with her about their ever interesting selves and awake the unfailing answer in her eyes, seemed a more charming amusement than making ardent love to a woman less lovely. Thus she furthered her husband's interests and protected herself. It was perhaps Fitzgerald only who saw through this subtly sweet artifice, and remained to himself and her her lover, though for very love's sake he withheld his passion, and allowed the pretence that she had moulded him into a mere friend. He knew her griefs;—far, far indeed would it have been from him to add a thorn to her path. And yet Sheridan felt this, as a dog follows a trail invisible, and resented that even the crumbs of what he had seemingly ceased to value should fall from his table to another.

But the strain was long and hard. It wore the bond to attenuation and at last to the breaking point.

Once more she had gone down to Richmond for a brief respite, for the still glades of the Park soothed her, and the blue winding of the Thames spoke of a far-off harmony she could not share. Fitzgerald had followed her down, permitted not encouraged, and they sat under the trees not far from the gate, where Perdita had seen them —a meeting place surely not liable to scandal, so many people came and went by it during the day. She wore a large hat shading her eyes, and a cloak thrown about her more heavily furred than the spring air called for.

As he joined her, the word "starry" which he always associated with her, seemed to fade and another—"shadowy" to take its place.

Yes,—her face with the delicate hollows in either cheek, the enlarged eyes like lakes of darkness, the clouds of hair about them, was shadowy as a face imagined in drifted vapours eclipsing it as soon as glimpsed. It gave him the first chill of dread about the heart that he had ever known in her company.

The day was most lovely, groups of pale primroses starring the roots of every tree. He gathered a few and gave them, and she touched the cool petals with her lips and breathed the perfume, then fastened them in her bosom.

"Sit beside me," she said at last. "I hesitated very greatly before I permitted you to come,—and you must think as we sit here that this is the last of our meetings. The first was in a spring whose primroses are all dead now. The last—is this."

He said nothing but put up his hand with a gesture that needed no words—as a man tries to ward off an evil he cannot avert—and knows it.

"Yes. Life has grown so difficult that it is wearing out life itself. Look here!"

She drew her sleeve back and showed her wrist, small

and thin as a child's, the blue veins raised and throbbing. He looked and was dumb.

"I can speak freely to you—the only person in the world to whom I can, for you comprehend me always,—and, oh, the relief to my overcharged heart!"

He ventured a word.

"If this is so—why shall we not meet?"

"You shall hear. But first, my story. My life has gone grievously astray. From the day we knew the Prince there has been no peace. My God, how I have suffered through that man! It has been like pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp, and it is leading me to death and my husband to ruin. But a woman might bear that and still snatch a sort of happiness—it is—no, how shall I say it? You have heard. You must, for all the world knows. He owned it to me himself lately."

"I know. I have heard."

"I think my reason left me for a while then, not a vulgar jealousy—it was never that, but—what would you feel if you saw your country's flag trodden on, spat on, dishonoured by a man who should have died to save it?"

"I see that daily," he said. "An Irishman knows that dishonour well. I comprehend you. But you have held your own aloft, and so, in my way, have I."

She scarcely heeded him. The words poured from her like blood from a wound.

"Marriage is a fearful thing. No escape. It holds you and fixes you for the torture. And if it called for one great sacrifice a woman might nerve herself to endure,—but the mean little altars where one sacrifices piecemeal all the treasures of life all day long. Oh, Fitzgerald, that's what breaks me. Infidelity—I might have nerved myself to that after a while, but sometimes he seems to rejoice to see me suffer until I'm ready to dash my head against the wall. He tortures me and doesn't un-

derstand or care how he does it. My endurance is worn out—and, this is worst of all, I think I love him no more. When a man is faithless,—when he is sodden with wine night after night, when all his brilliancy is kept for others, and all his gloom and anger for home—then what shall a poor wretched woman do?"

She stopped from sheer exhaustion, her bosom heaving passionately. He looked at her with a love and pity inexpressible in any words, and needing none, and in a moment more she flashed on.

"And I am courted by many men, and I declare to you, my only friend, that if there was one of them that meant anything to me there are times when I would have surrendered. Why should a true love be bound to a false one like a living body to a corpse? I said it to my sister-in-law one day and she was shocked and primmed her mouth and bid me have patience. Patience! Life ebbs while we have patience, and then the night and death."

The trees set thick with unopened buds were austerely beautiful against the faint blue sky. Almost more lovely than fulfillment was the promise of the year, trembling, hesitating, on the threshold, weak yet strong to endure until the summer outburst of triumph. She relaxed with a long sigh at last.

"Don't preach endurance to me," she said faintly. "I have preached it to myself until I sicken at the thought of it."

"Did I ever preach endurance? There was never a moment, Elizabeth, when my heart and my life were not yours to use as you would. But I knew you would never come. Why should you? You love your husband."

"You are very wrong there. There are times when I hate him," she said with pride.

"Hate him, no. If you had hated him, if you did now, I would force you to come to me, entreat until you were

mine. And it is certain we might then be very happy, for our hearts beat to the same harmony. But you love the man. I think him not worth it, to be candid, for all his brilliant gifts,—he is not capable of any deep feeling though of many impulsive ones."

"Ah, you understand him! That's the truth. He has no real feeling— Words, words,—beautiful, clever,—no one can talk like him,—and then people believe, for he believes himself at the moment. Wait till I die, and then you shall see. I give a month to his regrets—and one more to decency, and then—he'll follow the first pretty face that tempts him. I have fixed on her already—he says she is like me when first I caught his eye."

"Die!" he said—for that one word tolled like a bell—and he heard it only. "You shall not talk so madly. You shall live and be beautiful when he and I are dust. For God's sake don't torture me with such folly!"

And indeed he looked a tortured man. Of all the dreads he had experienced for her (and they were many) that had never been one. His love, her beauty, barred the way to a thought so horrible.

She smiled oddly, looking down at her hands and twisting the loose wedding ring about her finger.

"Why, you know, my friend, we Linleys never make old bones, as the saying is. We all go in our twenties, and if I have had the ill-luck to get a very little further it need not trouble me, the end is so sure. But I think had I been in other hands I had got a respite. This is trifling though, and I have not yet come to what I most wished to say. No—no, don't interrupt me. I shall speak of dying no more. It is more important to consider how to endure what life is left."

She put her hand on his lips to silence him, and he kissed it until she dropped it in self-defence—yet would not let him speak.

"You remember the day Perdita Robinson saw us here. I spoke with her for a few minutes after, and she, poor woman, herself in trouble enough, warned me that tongues were busy with you and me. I did not tell you—partly for cowardice, partly because I did not mean the brute world should howl us apart. But—within the last few days my husband has had an unsigned letter denouncing our meetings and—I assure you—had he been the most faithful, loving, tender husband in all the world, he could not have been more righteously angry. He said,—No, there are very few women who dare report their husbands accurately and without shame,—but though I assured him he had no cause to reproach me, I knew when the scene was closed that I had no strength for even one other such. Humiliating! I must needs send for the doctor and be physicked in state, and lie awake at night staring at a nodding nurse while my husband went down to Crewe Hall. So, because I have no strength to fight I must part with the one friend whom I could never shock or weary."

She had spoken with a would-be airy lightness, but two heavy tears gathered in her liquid eyes and did not fall.

But he—

For the first time in her life she saw the man transported beyond his guard—the stern guard he kept upon himself for her sake. It is best untold, for when such men yield it is like the breakdown of a dam and the outrush of the pent torrents. And indeed his emotions had been thus pent for years for her sake, for he had accepted with perfect loyalty the share allotted him of her good will and affection and on her own conditions. Now he flamed as when fire burns flax. Suffice it therefore to say that he entreated her to put herself in his protection if it were but as a sister, vowing to her and to the all-seeing Almighty that beyond whatever line she drew he would never

trespass, so only she would give him the privilege to guard her in life and death. There are few men in the world capable of a love so strong and calm, yet with such torrential fervours in its deeps. And indeed he had treasures to lay at her feet—a heart strong and free and all the inspiring romance and tradition of his great race, which made him a very perfect, gentle knight, without fear or reproach, as was proved later when he lay dying, betrayed and wounded to death for his country as he would have died for his love.

She heard him to the end, and then took his hand in both hers.

"I would go to you, my friend, if to any man, but it's impossible. Marriage throws a net about us that no woman of my strain can break. Your goodness is like cold leaves laid on an aching bruise, but it can be no more. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I love him deep down in my heart. I can't tell—it is too deep for me to get there and understand. But this I do know: If I were with you, in a month I should be struggling back to my home. My child for one, my husband also—and I should see all going to rack and ruin without me. With all his gifts, he's but a boy when it comes to taking care of himself or anything else. He needs me every moment, and the fine ladies are only cake and whipped cream. I'm bread and he can't live without me. You see? Oh, you always see. How should I doubt you? I'm his mother as much as I'm Tom's. You are the better man—God knows I have reason to know it—but—he's mine, you see. You are not."

He protested how utterly he was hers—body and soul, but she waved it off.

"No—dear man—no. I'm your starry figure of romance. Do you know me from Ireland always in your thoughts? I think not. But he wants me to send off the

butcher and baker when they press for payment, to sort his letters, to half manage Drury Lane,—Heaven knows what all! He's a ship at sea without me,—but you'll steer straight to the harbour of your dreams whether I live or— No, I won't say it. I shall live and rejoice in your triumphs, but not with you—no."

He could not move her. She eluded him gently but resolutely.

"I don't, I don't mean I shall never see you, Fitzgerald, but it can't be alone. I suppose a husband retains the right to complain and suspect however he behaves himself. Anyhow I have no strength to dispute it. Our friendship must feed on memory."

"And no hope?"

"What hope is there? Let us not deceive ourselves. And I outgrow hope daily. Do you remember the sweet verses you brought me once? You said I could write sweeter, but that was not true. I set them to music and sang them, but I shall not do that again."

She repeated very softly.

"A place in thy memory, dearest,
Is all that I claim,
To pause and look back when thou hearest
The sound of my name.
Another may woo thee nearer,
Another may win and wear.
I care not though he should be dearer
If I be remembered there.

Remember me then, oh, remember
My calm, deep love.
Though bleak as the blasts of November
My life may prove,
That life will though lonely be sweet—"

Her voice fluttered, but she went on to the end.

"Though its only enjoyment may be
A smile and kind word when we meet
And—a place in thy memory."

He could not speak. The words choked in his throat. He had lived on those meetings, starvation diet as they were to a man love-hungry. She rose and stood looking down the glade, starred with primroses, and turning her head from him, said slowly,

"You will marry one day, Edward,—yes, I wish it. Marry this beautiful girl like me, whom Chéri talks of. I won't tell you any but her Christian name. Leave the rest to chance. Her name is Pamela. And if you meet a beautiful Pamela one day who has my eyes, try to think I am looking through them and loving you. Remember I wish it."

He said many things then that she remembered later with a sad triumph which soothed her lonely heart. Was a woman beggared who had inspired a love so generous and pure? For the purity of a man's love is tested in a hotter fire than any woman's, and she knew it—had reason to know it daily in the contrast.

But they met alone no more.

CHAPTER XXII

BROKEN

It was many weeks later when Mrs. Armstead one night, brushing out Perdita's long locks, said with her usual calm:

"You reproached me once, Madam, for not mentioning that His Royal Highness made a custom of going to Cumberland House. It has reached my ears that he does so frequently and I should esteem myself very ungrateful for your kindnesses if I did not put the information at your disposal."

She had her instructions from Fox and presented the news in his very words, not intermitting the rhythmic strokes of the brush by a pulsation. She could see how the blood deserted the face in the glass and then rushed back in a painful torrent of red.

With what calm she could muster Perdita said:

"I am grateful to you. Do you know anything more than this?"

"Very little, Madam, except that 'tis said the play there is vastly high, the ladies playing high as well as the gentlemen, and His Royal Highness nearly always visits there in the evening now."

Perdita knew but too well that his evenings were not spent with her. She saw less and less of him as time went by and when she did see him the change in his manner terrified her. It was not actively unkind, but utterly careless. He lounged in yawning, yawned while he sat over his wine and lounged out again, still yawning. She saw, of course, that a part of this was due to his late hours and

excesses. He had begun with a fine constitution inherited from his temperate mother but no constitution in the world could endure such treatment. His fair skin was reddened and coarsened, the cheeks began to be unhealthily full, and there was a purple fulness under his eyes. He was angrily conscious of this himself, irritably sensitive on the subject, and his valets had a hard service owing to their inability to produce the same effects as with the slight and gallant young Prince of some years back. His waist corseted, dragged in, he would appeal to Perdita to assure him that he had gained no flesh or, at the least, that no one would guess it. "He whose smile was victory" as the journals had it, now required assurances of his power. "Supposing I was only the son of a country squire, would women still pursue me as they do now?"—that was his question, and Perdita assured him, trembling, that he was more attractive, more irresistible than ever.

"Ah, but you love me. You see no change?" his irritable vanity would question. After a scene of this sort there followed a day of good humour and then again estrangement.

The fire leaped up once or twice in dying, brightly enough to excite a hope as dying. The very night before Mrs. Armstead had made her confidence Perdita had his commands to attend the Birthnight ball at the Haymarket and to sit in his special box, and, splendid in gold tissue, but with an aching heart, she went—to be the mark and envy of nearly all feminine eyes. A Mrs. Denton sat with her, a woman of reputation as smirched as her own, the mistress of Lord Lyttelton.

Perdita looked idly over the moving, painted throng, brilliant as a flock of tropical birds, for men as well as women wore their best in honour of the Birthday. A space had been cleared below the box for the Prince's minuet, and, a very gay and sparkling figure, he was

speaking to a man he knew in the crowd, when Perdita saw a brown-haired beauty lean forward from a group and detach two rosebuds from the bouquet she wore on her bosom, holding them out to him with a smile which spoke volumes. It startled her horribly, for it was a thing no woman would dare unless she had reason to be very certain he was likely to be pleased with a gift so public. He bowed and took them, glancing up at Perdita with the victorious smile which she was beginning to dread so unspeakably.

"Who is that woman?" was all she could gasp to Mrs. Denton.

"Why, Madam, I thought all the world knew the famous beauty, Mrs. Elliott,—Grace Dalrymple Elliott. She's the most stylish woman of the day, so think some people —excepting yourself of course, and dresses—Lord, I'd give a guinea to know who pays for her clothes! Look at the point lace on that peach-blossom satin! I'll be sworn it cost a thousand pounds if a penny. Do but look. Possibly an heirloom. She's highly born."

Perdita looked at the costly dress flounced to extravagance with magnificent point lace which fell about the bodice revealing snowy shoulders and more of a most exquisite bosom than propriety would have approved if her opinion had been invited. The sparkling brown eyes, black-lashed and browed, were all of the *mignonne* order of beauty to match the cherry-red lips tucked in with a dimple at the corner *en suite* with the larger dimple in the peach cheek. The face of a Dresden shepherdess tutored by the French taste to *espièglerie*, and perfectly irresistible to a man of the Prince's order. The little feet flashing in their diamond buckles were Cinderella's own. Nature had finished and armed the lady at every point for conquest, and because she thought the acceptance of the rosebuds sealed her public victory, she shot a triumphant

upward glance at Perdita and edged somewhat nearer to the Prince.

Mrs. Denton rose, full of excitement.

"Lud, Madam, I must run down and see what folks are saying below. The hussy! That she should dare!"—and so slid out of the box and away with her like a pointer on the scent.

But mark what happened! As Perdita sat back behind her fan to choke down her mortification, the door of the box opened and Sheridan, dressed as gay in lavender satin and black velvet as his own Charles Surface, entered, his eyes so brilliant with pleasure that they positively rayed delight about the box. In his hand two rosebuds.

"Madam," with a bow and a flourish, "the Prince sends you these rosebuds just presented to him, and begs you to pin them above the kindest heart in the world. I rejoice to be his messenger."

All smiling and blushing like a girl or a rose, she took them from his hand and with his help secured them with a diamond brooch above the heart which throbbed so quickly. She leaned forward in the box that all the world might see her public triumph, and Sheridan stood beside her, laughing, excited, nearly as pleased as she.

"The thorns on the stems are piercing her heart now—now!" he said. "I took the rosebuds under her nose—the poacher, the base little pirate! She thought to down you publicly and exalt Cumberland House and all its works, and see her paid in her own coin! See—how she slinks away behind the old Lady O'Gorman's hoop. If you had struck her in the face with your glove you couldn't have routed her so successfully."

"But how came she and the Prince so confidential that she dared the attempt?" cried Perdita, radiant though still tremulous. "Why, even I had never ventured such an intimacy in public."

"Lord,—that's what he likes! If you dared more it would be the better, Perdita. He would choose what he calls a saucy rogue before any other. Egad, that's true. Take the lesson to heart, though it has ended well this time."

There was gravity under the jest of his tone, but Perdita, giddy with victory, tossed her head charmingly.

"Do I need instruction, Mr. Sheridan? If I did, would those rosebuds lie where they do now?"

He laughed, teasing her still.

"The pride of some people is monstrous indeed! But pray, Madam, don't let it overcome your discretion entirely, for his Royal Highness is coming up here or I am much mistaken."

He made his adroit escape, and the Prince entered directly after, all bubbling with vanity and wrath.

"Did you see that,—Perdita? Did you see the impertinence of that woman? Because I have noticed her she has the assurance to try to fix me in public. Me! As if she could ticket me with her whim? I thought what lesson I could give her to mortify her most sharply, and then I just happened to look up and saw you sitting there, and I said to Sheridan, 'By God, I have it!' and pitched them into his hand to take up to you. I took care she saw me do it and heard what I said, 'The kindest heart in the world.' That was good, wasn't it? The minx, the jilt, the —the demirep."

She might have wished a thought of herself, but was thankful to take what she could get and eagerly agreed as to the impudence of the lady.

"And what did she mean by the rosebuds, my Prince?"

"Why, a woman's sentimental foolery. Emblematical of me and herself. I wonder women in love will be such fools. Well, she's had her lesson."

"But where could you meet a woman of such manners?"

Her tone was a little too earnest for the occasion, and he got up instantly.

"What does that matter to you? I shall take it very seriously if you meddle in my affairs and all the more because I've just half broken her heart to distinguish you. I declare I pity her. Now—I'm off for the minuet."

He went, leaving her wretched, to sit watching him move with perfect grace through the stately measure, making the most of every meeting with every woman in its mazes. That was the worst of it. She could never be certain now what would please or offend him and seemed to be continually falling into traps the least real knowledge of his moods would enable her to avoid. She sat alone in the box, in little humour to enjoy the dancing.

When the minuet was finished he took his way to where Grace Elliott sat, toying angrily with her fan. She saw the bow, the smile, the charming pouted lips, the Prince's head bent close to the pretty ear, and then the fan slid into the beauty's lap and she looked up all fire and animation and rose with a defiant look at Perdita's box (many people noticed the by-play) and they went off together under a colonnade, and Perdita sat alone with the rosebuds withering on her heart, cold and lonely, while gossip passed below and wagers were made on the chances of the rival beauties.

Later Essex came up the stair and into the box, bowing profoundly.

"I have a billet for you from the Prince, Madam."

He tendered it. On a scrap of paper folded once was written:

"Impossible to attend supper to-night. Give my regrets to the guests. *Mille amitiés.*"

The supper—a table reserved for him, Perdita the hostess—all gaiety, brilliance, attention centred on it, the

world of London watching, and he could desert it like this and make her a public laughing-stock for the sake of— It struck her to the soul, and she sat dumb, while Essex watched her curiously. He had never admired her so much. The inner conflict, the enforced self-control, dignified her, and for the moment she was no longer lovely with her own soft voluptuous loveliness, but sternly handsome, her mouth set, her head well lifted,—at bay but unyielding. It was too much—too much! She had self-possession enough to say coldly:

"My Lord, will you inform his Royal Highness that I shall not be at the supper myself. I have a violent headache. I shall leave after this dance."

She would listen to none of his petitions, dismissed him quietly and went home alone.

She went home, and finding Mrs. Armstead pale from her vigil, but serene as ever, she commanded her on her obedience to find out where and how the Prince met Grace Elliott.

"I'll know everything even if it should kill me!" she said. "Spare me in nothing. Find out all and I'll give you this!" She laid her hand on the glittering brooch that had held the rosebuds and, seeing them lie beside it, she caught and flung them into the fire. The public insult had broken her endurance at last.

Mrs. Armstead's eyes sparkled like a mere woman's at the diamonds, but she veiled the light instantly.

"I could accept no present, Madam, for proper obedience to your commands and am not designed by nature for a spy. But you may rest assured you shall be mistress of any information I can gain."

She knew well enough where to gain it, for Fox had every detail now of how the Prince spent his days and nights and had told her with his air of mysterious gaiety that the time was come to let "Mrs. Perdita" know—

but gradually—"no shock to her sensibilities which can be avoided"—that her sun was set.

"The poor woman!" Mrs. Armstead said with decorous pity. "She has much good in her and little harm beyond a natural vanity."

Fox regarded her curiously.

"You are a judge of character, Mrs. Armstead? A singular woman. I have thought so more than once. You have served me well in this matter which indeed is a public one, and I shall not forget it. Is Mrs. Perdita in debt?"

"Heavily, Sir. I imagine she scarce dares face her milliner and jeweller's bills amongst others, but naturally looks to the Prince to settle them."

He shrugged his shoulders.

The Prince neither came nor sent next day nor for some days after, but in six Mrs. Armstead was furnished with her chronicle of the Prince's infidelities, and almost dreaded to lay them before her pale mistress. It would be an unlovely task to detail them. They covered more than Grace Elliott and revealed an abyss of deceit that would have made a less sensitive woman than Perdita quail in spirit, for it was not only the personal loss and ruin, but the shame—the biting shame that the world should know her lost and for such a payment.

When she learnt the facts it seemed that the universe was crashing about her. Then it was true—this was what the moralists meant when they said the wages of sin was death. Oh, worse than any death of the body! All worth living for was dead and she only lived that pride, shame, despised love, burning jealousy, might torture her. What emotion was there that did not fight in her miserable bosom? The height she fell from made her fall public, European, world-wide, in her estimation. There was not a man or woman living but would have it in their power to jeer, exult, or pity, as the fancy took them. What es-

cape for her in earth or heaven? So had the days gone by.

Mrs. Armstead had believed she would take it with broken-hearted quiet as she had done the first threatening of the storm, but no. There was a dead silence, and suddenly rising, she pushed the woman from the room and locked the door. What went on in that room none knew.

It remained locked all that night and the next morning, —not a sound, not a movement within, listen as they might, and terrified at her own responsibility lest it should be the quiet of death Mrs. Armstead had at last flung on her hat and cloak to go and take Fox's advice, when the Prince arrived after the absence of a week, and ran up the stair, stopping amazed on the landing to find the woman, white as a sheet, curtseying before him.

"Sir, your Royal Highness—" and with the utmost difficulty got out all the facts except the essential one. He pushed her aside and went to the bedroom door.

"Perdita, open instantly. You know my voice."

Dead silence.

"How dare you delay when I command you to open the door?"

Not a breath from within. He turned, even his floridity paling a little, to the woman, saying in a purposely loud voice:

"Send a flunkey upstairs, we must force the door."

A spring and a rush within, the door flung violently open, and Mrs. Armstead, with one look, fled down the stair and left the two alone.

For Perdita was terrible. Out of a face chalk-white stared wild eyes, the crust of dried tears about them, her cracked lips burnt red, showing the teeth within. For the moment every atom of beauty had deserted her except the long black locks which hung about her like a shroud. The Prince thought he saw a mad woman and she was

little better as she caught his hand and dragged him within the door and flung it shut, all in a breath.

Then she faced him.

"You have come to see the ruin you have made? Look at me then—look at me! Remember what I was and look at me."

He did look speechless, too much taken by surprise to make any attempt at flight, stunned by her daring. But rank was little in her thoughts at that moment.

"I gave you everything—I lost all for you, and you—O miserable traitor! I know of Grace Elliott and your other lies and when I die—as I will die—the world shall know what you are!"

She swayed as she stood, and anger and the sight of her weakness inspired him with a sort of base courage.

"What, a jade like you take me to task? What right have you to be so nice, Madam?—You who left your husband and child for a man who paid you well for your favours. Sit down and behave yourself before I have you carted to Bedlam as the lunatic you are."

If she could have kept it up she could have alarmed him into a kind of submission—some sort of mercy and terms, but she was so weak with fasting and emotion that the brute mastered the woman in her. She fell half fainting into a chair and covered her ravaged face with her hands. He saw and took his advantage and continued brutally:

"You to complain! Good God, what a jest. Did you think a man—and above all a man in my position—was to make a romance out of a woman who sold her virtue and made a Jew's bargain for it? You seasoned the dish with sentiment to suit your own palate, but it deceived none but yourself. What could a gentleman find in common with a woman whose trade it was to please the town, and how many went before me and will come after? I'm damned

to eternal perdition if I endure these scenes. I'll see you no more while the breath's in my body."

He had worked himself now into such a passion of egoism that he was as incapable of self-government as she.

She hid her face still, lying back in the chair as though dead. He raged on.

"But I had made up my mind to be honest with you, if you had shown the slightest care for my feelings. Fidelity is out of my power, but I would not have withdrawn my countenance and protection if you had deserved it. I would have left you such a share of my heart as would have contented a sensible woman, and you might have been happy and respected still if—"

Her hands dropped, she raised herself in the chair, trying with a visible knitting of the brows to control her whirling thoughts.

"You mean you would have made me one among creatures as miserable as myself? That you would have come to my arms from theirs? That you offer me this insult—Then, Prince as you are, I tell you I loathe and despise your offer. Bad as I am I am a better woman than you are a man. Go and let me never see you more. I ask no money from you. I will take none. I'll kill myself at your feet if you stay. Go."

Half coward and half bully, fearing a public scene, scandal, he knew not what, he went down on one knee before her with hatred in his heart, and tried to put his arm about her and cajole her with false kisses. She repulsed him violently, writhing herself back in the chair, and calling on him to "Go—go!"—her voice rising again beyond her own will into a kind of shriek. She was indeed on the verge of violent hysterics—a sight to frighten any man. He delayed no longer, but caught up his hat in terror and ran down the stair, calling for Mrs. Armstead.

The lacquey, bowing, informed him that she had left the house a moment since. The Prince followed the waiting woman's example with all the speed he could muster, and Perdita was left alone shrieking and sobbing.

There is no doubt of what the Prince of Wales became later, the only moot point is how much he might owe to bounteous nature and how much to the instructions of the Royalties of Cumberland House. They certainly obliged their Majesties to pay dear for any slight to the Luttrell Duchess in the manner in which they dealt with their Royal Son.

CHAPTER XXIII

RUIN

Not a soul came near Perdita all the rest of the day.

Towards evening a few words from Cumberland House reached her, now lying on her bed so exhausted that she could scarce raise her head from the pillow to read its brief contents.

"Madam, I informed you to-day in my just indignation that we must meet no more. Lest you should think this decision merely the effect of a passing anger, I judge right to confirm it in writing. It is impossible that we should meet again. I accept your rejection of the money provision I had proposed to make for you. I wish you farewell."

That and his signature ended his dismissal. She could make no reply if she would. No more was possible for her that night. Every emotion was exhausted. For a while she lay half unconscious and then a merciful oblivion seized her and she fell into a paralyzing heavy sleep that, as it were, drugged her until the tardy dawn awoke London to its cares.

Then indeed she seized her pen and, hearing the Prince had left for Windsor, wrote him a letter so passionate and pathetic that it appeared to her that no heart not formed of adamant could resist its pleadings. She despatched this by special mounted messenger and if I do not quote it it is because one would spare the wild outpourings of a woman in the last straits. She was beaten down at last into the dust.

Straits indeed, and quite apart from the agony of los-

ing the man she must at least believe she loved and for whom she had bartered her good name.

For with the chill of dawn came cooler reflections, terror of another kind, but only less soul-piercing. Money. She knew the bills she had run up in the year must amount to well over ten thousand pounds—much of it absolutely necessary in the gilded folly of her position and all encouraged and even urged by the Prince. There might also be remaining debts for the year before—she could not tell what had been paid and what left. In the ordinary course the Prince's man of business would settle them, but now—? True, there was the bond for £20,000 he had given her, and this by Sheridan's advice on her leaving the theatre had been deposited in safety, but if he refused to honour it, what redress? She could not proceed against him and if that impossible were possible no public opinion would be on her side. And even if he honoured it probably not a penny would be left for her livelihood. Otherwise a debtor's prison. For with men she had done once and for evermore, so she resolved. Was there one a woman could trust in the hour of need, one who without barter would give her the broken bread of friendship and bitter but wholesome wine of truth? In all the wide world she knew of none.

She got up and rang for Mrs. Armstead, careless at last that she or any should see her shattered beauty. There was a long delay and then an unknown woman's voice spoke at the door.

"Mrs. Armstead left the house yesterday, Madam, and sent for her traps this morning. We don't know her address. Do you wish breakfast served?"

There was a covert insolence in the tone that would not wholly disclose itself until it could be done with safety—a reconnoitring expedition, so to speak.

Perdita heard it with shuddering recognition but briefly

ordered a dish of tea and some toasted bread and then sat looking hopelessly about the room. The mad folly of it all! Without Mrs. Armstead she had no list either of her clothes or jewels, and it was now most necessary she should know what she could count on in both. Weak and wearied, she knew not even where to begin. A slow despair crept over her. How could she face the immense trouble, the maze of affairs that lay before her—and she a drowning dog with a stone about its neck, no hand stretched to help and the lookers-on mocking at her death struggles.

Last night she had been full of desperate burning defiance, to-day a paralyzing fog descended on all her faculties. What could a woman do in this vile world made only for the pleasure and arrogant sensuality of men?

She had flung back his money in his face yesterday and he had been swift to take advantage of that madness; to-day, crushed and humbled, it seemed to her that if she could only secure the payment of her debts and might creep away into some little lair in the country, far from the bitter world, death might come peacefully. The horror of a debtor's prison, the squalor, the vileness—oh, that must never be! She could never face it. He would never come back, but surely for the sake of past days he would not see her dragged down to such infamy. He could not. If he saw her grief, her shame, if she entreated pardon, he must have pity hidden within him somewhere that she could awaken. She would try, but how?

She dressed herself, sent for food again that her strength might not fail her, and sat all day revolving expedients until at last one, of which the very desperation suggested hope, occurred to her. At four o'clock with the early dusk beginning to fall in London, she made up her face as best she could, ate again, put on her hat and cloak and, pale and calm, went downstairs and ordered a

phaëton from the mews near at hand, to the intense astonishment of the servants, who had been accustomed to a very different order of things when Madam took the air. It came round with a driver and a mere boy to act as postilion, and in a clear voice she gave the order, "To Windsor."

There was never a wakeful night in her life afterwards nor many a dreaming one when the story of that dreadful journey did not repeat itself. She left Hyde Park Corner in the falling dusk, huddled in her cloak, planning scene after scene of tenderness and pleading in which she would win pity enough to save her from a most horrible calamity, and so absorbed was she that when they reached the inn at Hounslow and were about to change horses she started up pale and terrified as a criminal arrested when the innkeeper stood beside her, his hand on the door.

"I think you should know, Madam, before crossing the heath that every carriage passing for the last ten nights between here and Windsor has been attacked and rifled by highwaymen and footpads. It matters nothing to the men with you for they'll go through scot-free, but for yourself—a lady of your beauty and fashion will be rifled of every doit you possess, and perhaps of more."

She stared at him, but half comprehending.

"Do you speak for your own interest, my friend?"

"Not I? I thank the Lord I don't depend on a chance traveller here and there. I speak for yourself, and, having shot my bolt, leave it to yourself. Will you stay?"

She looked at him with grief-worn eyes that haunted the man, as he admitted after.

"If there were devils, not highwaymen, on the heath, I must get through them this night. But I thank you."

He shut the door loudly, and once more they thundered on out of the lights of Hounslow into the waste dark.

She, the timidest of women in such dangers, had no fears that night. If they killed her might it not be the best end to her troubles, the destined answer to the riddle of her life?

So they sped along the dangerous road and had scarce reached the middle of the Heath when a man, springing from the bushes at the side, made a dart to clutch the reins and clutched air instead, for the boy, catching sight of him in time, spurred the leader, and by a sudden bound of the light carriage, the ruffian missed the rein. They flogged the horses along like mad, the footpad running his best to overtake them. Often and often she leaned out, staring back, to see him nearing, but four legs outmatched two, and human heart and brain cracked under the strain, and he fell, panting out breathless oaths by the roadside. Even then it seemed an age before the half-foundering horses dashed into the lights of the Magpie Inn on the heath and pulled up in safety. It was only then she remembered she had a fine diamond stud stuck in her black stock which they could only have got by strangling her.

Yet, diamond or no diamond, that might have been her best end, for she was nearing the limit of endurance, and sitting in the miserable parlour waiting for fresh horses she saw a sight that darted new fears through her exhausted being,—an intimate of the Prince's, Harry Meynell, with a woman, a Mrs. Allington, that had figured large and lewd in Mrs. Armstead's chronicle. They too were on their urgent way to Windsor, and to what end she might very well guess. She dropped a thick veil over her face and stood holding by the door while she must needs wait, and so saw them set off, the man fingering his pistols as one prepared for desperate resistance, the whole sight a nightmare of dread and shame to Perdita; yet immediately after she dared the dangers of the heath again, and so onward and at last into Windsor, through

Eton, where the lamps were extinguished and a cold moonlight possessed the streets. So up to the Castle. She knew well where he would be found in the vast rabbit warren, and sitting in the carriage, she wrote with shaking hands a few passionate lines to implore pity and to tell him the dangers through which she had come, and sent them in to his apartments.

The Queen's Lodge slept in a moonlit quiet, but in his wing there was much light and the sound of voices and the inevitable hurry and confusion which appeared to attend him, go where he would. The night was frosty and it was a strange period of breathless suspense to sit in the phaëton, watching the steaming horses, and seeing the moon small and remote in the clear frost glorifying the tree tops far below the Terrace and shining in silver on the gliding Thames. The noble aspect of the place gave her a strange shy comfort for the moment. The Heir of this high royalty could surely act no wholly unworthy part to the woman who had trusted him so madly! Some gleam of chivalry must enkindle him from the brooding quiet of the immemorial splendour, grave with age and power, which dwells among the towers of the noblest Kings' House of all the world. To be the son of *that*—how much it meant! She leaned out, for a moment lulled by higher thoughts, watching the austere quiet of the freezing star-sown sky in the first stirring of hope she had known for days.

The messenger returned. He carried in his hand a paper. Her own letter torn in two and thus returned to her.

As she sat, numbed with the blow, the moonlight full on her face, her veil tossed back over her hat and forgotten, a carriage passed, coming slowly up the ascent, and a lady, seeing her, laid her hand on the check-string.

It stopped beside the phaëton, and the lady leaned out,

so near that she could have put her hand on Perdita's.

"Mrs. Robinson!" she said softly. "Surely I don't mistake. This is an incredible meeting, for it so chances I was vastly anxious to speak with you. Had you word of it? I sent a message to your house early this morning."

She turned unseeing eyes on the newcomer, filled with a woe unspeakable and said nothing. The other saw her grief and spoke again.

"Mrs. Robinson, a word with you additional to what was said in London the day we met is absolutely necessary. What brings you here? You look ill and exhausted? What are your views? I am Lady Harcourt. Have you forgotten me?"

And still not a word forthcoming.

Lady Harcourt's kind heart had been moved by their former meeting. It was doubly stirred by the mute misery before her. She desired her man to open the door of her carriage, and taking Perdita by the hand, drew her in, and dismissed the phaëton, and so sat quietly beside her until the carriage drew up at the door of her own apartments in the immense pile darkening in the shadows.

Perdita had not fainted and yet was scarcely conscious of the strangeness of her position before she found herself seated by the fire in a large room with the curtains closely drawn and an air of comfort and quiet luxury. She had not known how cold she was until the splendid flames thawed her frozen hands and feet and brought a faint colour to her death-pale cheeks as she sat in the high-backed chair and as in a frozen dream watched the lady busy about her comforts. Chocolate was rung for and came, brought by a decorous waiting-woman, on a silver tray with thin silver pot and cups of finest porcelain. Her cloak was unfastened, her hat removed, and orders given that she could not hear, and then the door closed and Lady Harcourt came and stood before her looking

down like a mild beatification upon the wreck before her.

"Why, you are a mere slip of a girl!" she said. "I did not realize— How old are you?"

"Two and twenty, Madam, in years. In sorrow a very old woman."

A pause. Then the elder woman said gently.

"We will not speak of that as yet. You need rest very greatly. Drink this chocolate and eat. I have a thing to say to you which you may be anxious to hear. Compose yourself for it."

The voice with its reserved sympathy gave her a strength of its own, and with an apology for the weakness that kept her in the chair she raised herself and began to eat and drink, Lady Harcourt sharing the little meal and putting in a soft word now and then relating to the cold, the journey from London and such topics.

Perdita acknowledged afterwards that this kindly attention and the return to the ordinary usages of life had probably saved her reason under the dreadful reaction. It seemed like an episode in a dream to be seated in the fine-curtained room so gently warm and dignified. Thus great ladies live, with past and future secure and honoured,—and that she, a storm-beaten bird from unknown lands, should have been received into such a refuge made it still more dream-like.

She raised her head at last, refreshed, and looked with sadly questioning eyes at the lady who sat before her.

"Madam, I thank you for more than you can guess. It is time for me to go, but before I do so, let me assure you that I did my very best to carry out her Majesty's commands, and failed. I was not worthy to succeed, therefore it is useless to trust me further. I failed. I am a worthless woman all ways."

She looked about her for her cloak and hat, but they

had vanished. My lady pressed her gently back into her chair.

"I have given orders that a chamber should be prepared for you. You are in no fit state to leave this shelter to-night. I have named you to my woman as Mrs. Shelton of London, and no difficulties can arise. Are you sufficiently rested to hear what I wish to say?"

Her quiet manner steadied Perdita and helped her to composure.

"I am ready, Madam, and with a heart so grateful as can find no words to relieve itself."

Lady Harcourt drew her chair nearer.

"I wish first to ask you a question which you must of course answer or not as you please. Have you still any influence with his Royal Highness?"

She hid her face with her hand in answering.

"None, Madam. None whatever. The connection is ended and I am thrown on the world as if he had never valued me."

There was a pause, then my Lady Harcourt said slowly and gravely:

"Would that fact liberate you to give some information, which may be much for his Royal Highness's good, to a person who has a right to ask it?"

Perdita looked at her with piteous eyes.

"Madam, if it were to do him good, yes, but however I have been treated I would sooner die than harm him. I beseech you not ask me anything tending to that. But anything else I will gladly tell if I know it."

Lady Harcourt rose and stood a moment looking at the fire as if in meditation and no more was said until there was a silver tinkle of a bell in a room beyond, when she turned and for a moment paused at the door, and spoke with a grave simplicity.

"I would have you remember, Madam, that his Royal Highness was and is the Queen's favorite son—dearer far to her than any other of her children. Think of her as a mother, I beseech you."

She turned and disappeared leaving Perdita alone in the strangest condition of almost painful suspense and expectation. What was to be asked? To whom would her reply be taken? A firm resolve to betray nothing that could injure the Prince was her only clear thought at the moment.

The door of the room opened, and a lady came in, attended by Lady Harcourt who marshalled her to a chair very quietly, but with an unmistakable show of reverence. Perdita had risen instinctively and curtseyed and then stood, supporting herself by one hand on the back of her chair, awaiting she knew not what, while the lady seated herself.

She was dressed in a very elegant dress of grey silk with lace falling over the bosom and sleeves and an undress cap of lace to match. A chain of pearls was caught with a stomacher brooch of large and magnificent drop pearls, and on one wrist was a bracelet of small miniatures set in diamonds. But it was none of these details which held Perdita's eyes, but a likeness known all over the Three Kingdoms, and it was with knees almost failing beneath her that she knew in whose presence she stood.

Queen Charlotte regarded her with an air distantly cold and calm, yet in no way unkindly. She addressed herself to her directly, and Perdita, half stupefied, curtseyed again, almost to the ground, and stood like a criminal before the judge.

"My Lady Harcourt sent me word that you were here, Madam, and since the matter is highly confidential, I resolved on seeing you myself for a moment. Be seated. You have the appearance of suffering and fatigue."

She still stood, however, clinging to the chair.

"It has reached my ears that the Prince, my son, is heavily in debt. Can you throw any light on the probable amount?"

She faintly motioned the words, "No, Ma'am," with her lips rather than her voice.

"I thought that would probably be your answer. If, however, you could gain that information for me, you would possibly put it in his Majesty's power to assist him. He can in no way arrive at the facts. There is a conspiracy of silence."

As the Queen paused, Lady Harcourt spoke in a low voice.

"You should understand, Madam, that it is a point on which his Majesty has been misled both by over and under statement. He desires the simple truth."

Perdita thought of Sheridan—who would certainly know much, and collected herself for the effort of speech. Her own words, however low, terrified her. The thought of other debts rushed over her and dyed her face with crimson. Hers, adding to the Prince's; the bond—! The madness and wickedness into which in the eyes of all decent people she had plunged herself.

"Ma'am—Your Majesty, I believe I might ascertain," she faltered out.

"In that case, communicate with my Lady Harcourt. You will be doing the Prince a service. There is another matter."

A long pause, filled by the soft noises of the flickering flames and dropping ash of the fire. The candles were few in the room, and the firelight played on the Queen's worn face and the brilliants which flashed as she moved her hands now and then with a foreign gesture which emphasized her speech.

"It has reached me that there is a plan on the part of

the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland to inveigle the Prince into marriage with a lady known to the Duchess but who does not herself frequent Cumberland House. It is important I should know that lady's name as soon as possible. We can in no way gain it. Such a marriage would be his ruin."

She said the words without a flicker of feeling, always with the same stately composure. Yet Perdita knew well the heart-break which must lie behind those words. And when the Queen added with the same composure: "He is still very young"—her whole heart trembled with a passion to help if that were at all possible. She said in broken tones:

"I think, Ma'am, I can supply the name, if I may entreat that my own may be entirely suppressed. Your Majesty will graciously understand—"

"I understand," said the Queen, sitting motionless in her chair. "Your confidence shall be respected. What is the name?"

"I have heard, Ma'am, that Mrs. Fitzherbert, a Roman Catholic lady, is thought to be—"

She could not finish the sentence, her lips were so trembling. The Queen looked startled for a moment—a sort of pale flash swept over her face, but she made no remark, passing on to her next question as if the last were forgotten.

"Finally,—is it within your knowledge that the Prince has borrowed large sums of money from the Duke of Cumberland?"

"I cannot tell, Ma'am.—Yes,—I do know of one sum of four thousand pounds. I know no more. Indeed, I would answer your Majesty if I could."

"I know it," said the Queen. Then slowly: "You will not imagine, Mrs. Robinson, that I feel anything else than deep disapproval of your line of conduct, when I say

that I believe you have had deep reason to regret it and I recognize in you a sensibility which moves me very deeply. I shall not again see you, but I shall remember you with sympathy. I desire you will accept this small token of that feeling."

She beckoned, extending her hand, and Perdita, moving toward her, trembling with awe and agitation, fell on her knees as much before the mother as the Queen and received a little case without the power to open it or to express her thanks otherwise than by an upward look of grief that evidently moved the Queen, for though she said no word, she touched Perdita's shoulder for a moment with light fingers and seemed about to speak,—then turned away, looking at Lady Harcourt who, taking a pair of candlesticks, lit her Majesty ceremoniously from the room. Perdita, still kneeling, half dazed by the strangeness of the interview and her own feelings, heard the light rustle of their silks die in distance and knew that the strangest interview of her life was at an end.

Presently my Lady Harcourt returned and gently helped her to rise.

"You have done well," she said, "and have possibly aided the Prince's true interests, little as he would admit it. I have sometimes thought that if the Duchess of Cumberland knew the Queen's agony—after all she is a woman, and must have the remnants of a heart,—and her Majesty's sufferings are pitiable. But that is a useless vision. You must now sleep, and I trust will be restored in the morning."

She herself attended Perdita to the room prepared for her, and parted from her kindly, desiring her to order horses at what hour she judged best.

"I shall always remember you with kindness," were her parting words.

It was scarcely seven o'clock when Perdita started on

her return journey to London, not having seen her hostess again. She had put in her bosom the little gold case of thimble, scissors, and other small feminine toys the Queen had given her. It bore the Royal cipher and crown and had evidently been a personal possession.

CHAPTER XXIV

FRIENDSHIP

When Perdita reached Cork Street, she found an avalanche of care awaiting her. The servants were on the point of leaving, having heard from the Prince's steward that the establishment was to be broken up, and indeed the upper servants were already gone, leaving only two or three women servants whom it was necessary to retain until arrangements could be made for the house and furniture. It was not yet known what those would be. All arrangements had slipped from her hands, and it appeared uncertain how long she herself could stay. Her first proud and indignant impulse was to leave at once, but pride must be controlled by possibility and without money or friends she had literally nowhere to go. She was obliged to remember with shame that the two last payments to her mother for the child's expenses had not been made, for one of the first letters which met her eye was an entreaty from Mrs. Darby that the money might be sent at once—even warm winter clothing was needed. That could be covered by the sale of a jewel. She hurried upstairs, and lying on the dressing table saw a heap of jewel cases open and empty. The rats in leaving the sinking ship had not forgotten to carry off their plunder with them. In that dire extremity strength of a sort she little expected came to her. Things of a very different order had gone so deep that she had little room for such surface griefs as these. She stood a moment looking at the confusion, opened the wardrobes, and noted with a smile edged with bitterness that some of the more costly dresses were missing. Yesterday she had been mar-

velling how she could go alone through the lists of her possessions. To-day the toil had been considerably shortened. That was all there was to be said about it.

She sent a message for the steward and pointed out the robberies with composure not wholy assumed, then desired he would send a messenger to request Mr. Sheridan to come to her as soon as he could spare the time. The information she needed for the Queen was first in her mind, but he was the only possible mediator between her and the Prince, and since she had now proved that any appeal to love or pity was in vain, she knew that she must employ some one capable of making the Prince hear reason, and disentangling at all events his obligations from hers. Therefore she sent for Sheridan.

He came in the late afternoon of the next day—a long and cruel wait for her suspense, but, as he explained, he had been at Windsor with the Prince's party and had only just returned. He bore all the outward marks of the expedition—floridly flushed face, shaking hands, and eyes unnaturally bright. But the old kindness was in them, and as Perdita touched his hot, moist hand, a pity for him only second to herself stirred in her heart. Ruin takes different aspects for a man and a woman, but its work, once begun, is apt to be thorough in either case.

He sat down and surveyed her in silence. She spoke with strange quiet as it seemed to him.

"It's all over, Mr. Sheridan. I've seen for some time it was coming, and it's come. No hope anywhere. What has he said?"

"What has he *not* said? You know his fluency—he went on speaking until I thought he never would have done. Complaints, gushes of sentiment, furies—what use to recount it all? The thing is over. I doubt if he will ever settle himself in this comparatively public way again. But you—have you the bond?"

"I have the bond. Is it worth anything? Be candid with me. You are my one friend."

"It seems impossible he can dishonour his own bond, and yet— You must have a friend to act for you—to sound him. To press him would be fatal and only provoke one of his blind rages. They grow on him so that I really have fears of a fit of some kind when he loses self-control. You must empower some sensible man who has influence with him and can use tact and discretion."

She looked at him beseechingly.

"Mr. Sheridan, I am heavily in debt, and my all depends on that bond. It is frightful to think of my position if it is not paid. Who is there but yourself who agrees with your description? Will *you* speak to him? I entreat you."

He was staring at the floor, not looking at her.

"I fear it would only damage your cause. I have much less influence with him than you suppose. I told you before—in private I'm a boon companion—let us say court jester. I may be more one day—probably shall, but at present I am not the man you need—far from it. You know my sympathy is all yours—God knows I know what a hard service it is to live with the Prince! I warned you at the beginning. You'll do me that justice."

She felt his words as a rebuff, and they stung her into a hot flush. She would not press him—no, not if she died for it. Her case must be desperate indeed if Sheridan flinched from it. He noted her silence and spoke hurriedly.

"I may as well own the bond was mentioned, and I said what I dared. He let loose floods of eloquence to prove that he could not pay it—it had only been a formality, and besides—and surely this was madness if true,—he said you had haughtily disclaimed any assistance from him. You could not have done this?"

"I did,—in a pride and anger which I have no means of supporting. I saw next day that the luxury of delicate feelings is not for such as me."

"Very few of us can afford it—certainly not I!" said he with a grimace. "You should never have done that. However, there is one man who truly has influence with him—the influence of interest, because politically he will very soon be in a position to say whether the Prince's debts shall be paid by the nation or no. Fox is the man you should see. If any one can do it he can."

Perdita remembered the curious fixed gaze, the coarse unkempt person of Fox with antipathy. She had never been drawn to him. Even the much-praised wit did not attract her. Possibly wit is the last attraction to draw a woman. It is a light artillery which may be alarmingly turned on herself at any moment. She fears it.

"He is not interested in me nor I in him. No, I have no friend there! Oh, Mr. Sheridan—"

"You are vastly mistaken. Charles is prodigiously interested in you. Will you see him? I can send him if you will but give the command. I strongly advise it."

She wavered, hesitated—"I would so much prefer your kind offices."

"But if they are useless? Remember the Prince and I have already discussed it. Will you empower me to send Fox?"

She agreed faintly at last, then turned to another subject.

"I have told you I am in debt,—and all so inextricably mixed up with the Prince's obligations that I scarce know mine from his. Indeed at the beginning I was assured he would bear all my expenses. Have you ever heard what his debts amount to?"

She carefully concealed her reason for the question, but it appeared such a natural one that Sheridan never gave

it a second thought. Indeed he had supposed she knew.

"Two hundred thousand pounds will never see him clear and I believe that doesn't include card debts where to a certain extent the Duke of Cumberland is said to have financed him. That man's influence over him is nothing short of a public disaster. The woman's too. They'll ruin his career if he goes on, and, with these events in France stirring up revolutionary feeling everywhere, God knows how it may end! He may live to curse the day he ever came across that pair."

"You are sure of that?" she said slowly. "If it be so one may understand it is a grief to his mother."

"A grief? A terror. The Queen is nothing to me personally, for I've attached myself to the Prince's faction for good, but a man needs not be a Puritan to pity what she must feel about him. Fox says there's a new plot at Cumberland House—to marry and ruin him. I know no details yet."

She was silent. It appeared strange that she should know the name of the woman concerned and that it should not have reached Sheridan. She wondered and not for the first time how Mrs. Armstead had gained her knowledge, but it was not for her to enlighten him. What did it matter? What could anything matter in her desolate future? As she sat, lost in sad thought, changed indeed from the bright, triumphant Perdita of his earlier memories, a deep pity for her seized Sheridan—the poet's strange comprehension of women and their sufferings, so hopelessly denied to men who have no touch of the finer imagination. In a flash he knew what it must be to sit there, flung from her height of glittering shame, deserted, betrayed, cast out like a fox hunted dead for the hounds to tear with bloody jaws, and for that flash he dwelt in her heart, felt with every throb of it. With exquisite gentleness he laid his hand on hers.

"If I have seemed hard 'tis because it's better for us both. There are things and feelings that bear no words. I'll speak for you again. I'll do my best, but Fox is your real hope."

He paused a moment then went on:

"But what will you do with your future, Perdita? Have you thought of it?"

She laid her hand over his, and he could feel its chill.

"I thank you with all my heart. Indeed I have thought and thought but to no purpose. Tell me the news. I have been so absorbed in cares which I won't inflict on you that I know not what is said of me. If the news prints are as malicious as in the days of my splendour, I am undone indeed. Is there any hope of the stage? Oh, if that could be! If I could forget all this mad folly and get back to my honest work again."

"There's not a feeling heart but is on your side," he said, looking tenderly on her. "And the Prince is condemned as he should be. I have not been near him since it all took place, and though I can't pretend that, owing to political matters, I can abstain altogether from his company, yet mine is the feeling of many."

She thanked him with a light pressure of the hand.

"Even that trifling cynic, Horace Walpole," he continued, "takes your part. He made a rejoinder to a chance comment that warmed me, and Mrs. Siddons, the irreproachable, calls you 'the charming and beautiful Mrs. Robinson. I pity her from the bottom of my heart,' says she."

"Then, dear friend, can I return to the stage? It would be half a life to me to know that possible?" She looked up at him with eager hope.

He shook his head slowly.

"I said every *feeling heart* pitied you. The people neither feel nor reason. They see you but as a justly dis-

graced royal favourite who by leading the Prince astray helped to blast the hopes of the nation. He goes from bad to worse. The Cumberland mark is deep on him."

"And they call it mine!" said Perdita, with passion.

There was a long silence. Her thoughts were far away at Windsor. She neither saw nor heard him for a moment. He roused her at last.

He drew a small newsprint and a pamphlet from his pocket, and showed her a marked article in the first. It was a song of triumph over the breach between the Prince and herself, both represented by initials. "What could be expected of a young man of great position, thrown most injudiciously into the society of leeches and blood-suckers who would practise on his youth and drain him dry for their base advantage?" That was the key-note of it all, and the pamphlet was a lampoon of the basest, in which her miserable married life was held up to ridicule, and all her husband's backslidings attributed to her own light behaviour. Names were given under asterisks and dashes which did not disguise them. A rare feast of garbage for the royal jackals who would make the most of them.

He saw her lips quiver.

"I would have spared you if I could, but you must know it,—I see not even how you can defend yourself. He carries the heavier guns and will use them. Indeed you would be better out of London for the next few months."

She said hopelessly:

"I have nowhere to go. No one to go to. My future? Good God, Mr. Sheridan, if ever you valued me, pray that there may be none—that I may die this night."

He leaned over her and took her hand.

"I have loved you since ever I knew you, I believe, Perdita. Is there any hope for me now?"

It was strange that whenever he thought her forgotten she asserted herself the stronger. He must, it appears, have loved her in some way of instinct that he himself could not decipher—some dim heart's yearning very unlike his habitual infidelities. She looked at him with an inscrutable smile.

"Go home to your wife!" says she. "Look at me and see what good comes of flying in the face of the world. Don't let all your brilliance and beauty—yes, I will say it, you *are* beautiful, Mr. Sheridan, and sure the brilliantest thing God ever made!—don't let that, I say, go down like water in the sand. Oh, I know you can laugh me out of countenance. The Magdalen turned moralist is a common figure. But you're worth a hundred of me. Politics, literature, life itself, are in love with you. Don't repay their devotion with folly."

He looked at her oddly.

"I believe you're right," said he. "Don't I know it? And yet I shall no more escape the maelstrom than you. I'm caught in it already. I came here to pity and support, and I make illicit love to you, you poor, sad woman! We're doomed wretches, the pair of us, Perdita. Where pleasure beckons I must follow even if I know the Death's head behind her grin. Sure you, like me, see the horrid injustice of it, weak human nature and every lure spread about it. Beauty and brilliance but entrap the more. Sin? Why, if we forgive God 'tis as much as He can ask of us, and for my part I don't promise Him that. Do you?"

She shook her head weakly, out-wearied. What did this or aught else matter? He rose; the night was falling outside sombre between the dark houses and a few stars shone faint in the clouds.

"Is that an emblem of hope somewhere millions of miles away?" says he, pointing up, "or the token of our little-

ness set there to shame us for ever from any thought of our own consequence? Oh, our patron saint summed it up for us once and for all:

> " 'Life's a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying—Nothing.' "

There was a long silence. He broke it presently:

"You tell me to go back to my wife. Why should she forgive me? Would I forgive her the like? Oh, the madness, the folly, the waste, the ruin. What hell do we need other than the one we contrive for ourselves?" She saw his figure black against the darkening window and wept silently. He stood there awhile, then returned and stooping, kissed her cheek and went out.

She heard of him next day, gayest of the gay, at Carlton House with the Prince, and sitting alone, half broken-hearted, sent her information by a sure hand to Lady Harcourt, then wrote to Charles Fox, ceremoniously requesting an interview.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAN OF INTELLECT

In a few days a ceremonious message arrived from Fox, requesting the honour of waiting on her as soon as convenient, and, permission given, he arrived at the same hour as Sheridan had done. She shrank from that visit in a way inexplicable to herself, though she tried to attribute it to his known low opinion of women and the amours unchivalrous and cynical which were the common talk in the Prince's circle, and indeed all the town over. A loose, coarse man, coarse in person and manner in spite of his aristocratic descent and prejudices, there was reason enough for any woman to dread him, and yet behind all this was an indefinable something more which raised its head like a dog on guard and watched.

He entered in a snuff-stained cloth coat, with a hanging cravat which would have been better for the wash-tub, and an over-tight waist-coat yielding at the buttons about his portly figure. And yet a man no person, either man or woman, could afford to despise or neglect. The mouth was full of brazen humour, the eyes glittered with cold intelligence when not concealed into a smoulder by the heavy eyelids he let fall when he wished rather to observe than to be observed. When he pleased, he could assume the bearing of a gentleman and it sat easily upon him, and at his worst he was still a gentleman, with a taste however for wallowing rather than soaring. At the moment he was neither at his best nor worst, he was cautious and felt his way.

"I have the honour to obey your commands, Madam,

with which I was favoured through Sheridan," he said with a bow as he took his seat.

"I thank you, sir," she replied, resisting the impulse to be brief and leave the room. She felt it odious to open her griefs to him. What in his eyes could she be but the wanton dismissed when she had ceased to please? Sheridan had comprehension, but he—! She continued however.

"I imagine that Mr. Sheridan informed you, Sir, of my position. I am heavily in debt for expenses unavoidable in my position. I have no means to keep up the house nor to go elsewhere. My woman, Mrs. Armstead, having deserted me (his eyelids concealed his down-looking eyes), the more valuable part of my jewels were stolen in my absence,—and before very long I shall want bread. You are aware his Royal Highness gave me a bond for £20,000 to be paid when he came of age. It was never paid, nor would I allude to it. Now it is all my hope."

"That bond, Madam, the Prince has already discussed with me. I fear you must not build on it—I fear so indeed, painful though it be to say so. Not only has he not the means to pay it, being himself plunged in debt, but he tells me you assured him you would accept no money provision whatever."

"I did—in a moment of madness such as no gentleman would remember against a miserable, deserted woman. But I have no provision—no money. The debtor's prison. Will he see the woman he loved sink to that? What will the world say?"

"I fear the world is likely to be so thoroughly prejudiced against you by the shameful stories put about that it will give you little support. If you were aware how it grieves me to make such a statement you would pardon my bluntness. Indeed I dare not deceive you. The case is too momentous."

"But the bond!" she protested faintly. "Sealed with the royal arms. His word as a Prince."

"Why, indeed, Madam, you might put it to the test by an action. The Prince is but a subject, though the first, and therefore may be sued. But I would have you consider very seriously first. You would scarcely find an advocate of the first rank to undertake your cause. The expense would be enormous, and I doubt whether a bond drawn for—for such value received, is a legal instrument."

Her face flushed a violent crimson.

"Mr. Fox, you insult me. That bond was to reimburse me for leaving a lucrative profession. For nothing else. I cast away my livelihood—like a mad woman!"

"It might indeed bear that construction," he returned gravely. "Yet I imagine the other would be the popular one. It is indeed a very difficult and peculiar case. But banish the idea of insult, my dear madam, I have always had the deepest admiration for you, and insult—I'll be damned if I wouldn't knock the man down who dared so much as an insulting glance at you. I hope I know a refined woman when I see her. Facts, however—"

He paused on a regret he did not express. She felt herself caught in a net unbreakable every way. Everybody, even Sheridan, appeared to take it calmly enough that she must suffer, that prison and starvation might be in the order of the day for her, while they continued their lives of ease and comfort. They would see her drop out, as a woman might fall over a precipice, and resume their journey calmly with a gentle regret, if so much. And she—whom once they could not flatter sufficiently—the celebrated actress, beauty—half royal by the Prince's favour—was, when he turned that favour from her, to be nothing? It struck her like a blow, and she retaliated

furiously. Anger, defiant, reckless, dangerous, rose in her and broke from her lips.

"Do you dare to mean that the Prince would see me die in the gutter and spend no thought, much less a coin, on the woman he seduced from her duties? I'll not believe it."

"Indeed, there can be no question as to his duty in the matter," said Mr. Fox with grave regret. "But, as for opening his eyes to it—I own I despair."

"And does he believe I'll endure his vile insults and cruelties with patience? Do you believe it? Let me tell him 'tis dangerous work to drive a woman to the point where he drives me. He thinks because he is Prince of Wales and I nothing that I'm helpless. Tell him nothing is further from the truth. I can make him suffer, though not as he makes me, for I have a heart and he has none."

"Then how, Madam, do you propose to make his Royal Highness suffer?" says Mr. Fox, very gravely, but with a look in his eye such as one bestows on a raging child, pretty in its naughtiness.

"One may suffer elsewhere than in the heart, and because one is a Prince, even more. Tell him this—this—" She was working herself up into a rage-royal and flung it out raging, tense as a steel spring, quivering with resistance, her eyes flashing furies on the man. "Tell him I have letters, letters—hundreds of his letters, with such things in them as the world would gloat over. Enough to ruin him with his friends that he abuses and ridicules. Does he think that I shall lie dumb in prison while I can turn that weapon in his heart? Tell him that, and see what the coward says, for a coward he is under the surface."

She got home to Fox there and then. Letters! He had never thought of that. The fool! the fool! Who would have thought a man would so court his own ruin! To

write to his wanton in such a fashion! Fox, who had written to many women in his time and would again, could thank God there was not a scrap of his writing extant such as he might not show to his own grandmother if he were so minded.

But this was an awful business. It might ruin not only the Prince but all his party with him, for if he wrote as he talked—loose, lying—why then!—For the moment he was completely nonplussed and could but play for time while he collected himself.

"If indeed you have such documents, Madam, I dare assure you they are of no worth from your point of view nor could you use them!"

"Could I not? We shall see." She was pacing swiftly up and down the room and he could not see her face, only her profile and one white cheek, red-spotted with passion.

"But even if worthless for extortion, at least let me hope you keep these letters in a safe place!"

She detected his drift instantly.

"And yet they are worthless? Yes, I keep them in a sure place, a very secret one, and where none of the Prince's followers are likely to find them."

"If you ventured to publish them—" he began, and she turned and flashed at him:

"Did I talk of publication? And yet I might— But apart from that, I know what he has written, and you don't, and I can make use of them a hundred ways and will, and will, so sure as God hears me, if I am left to ruin."

He had now collected himself a little from the first shock and tried a new method with her.

"A man can't be surprised you should feel yourself driven to desperate remedies, Madam. But it *is* desperate, God knows. To pit your future against public opinion—"

"My future!" she interrupted. She laughed aloud as

she spoke, a laugh very unlike her own, and swept the man and his would-be arguments aside like dust beneath her feet. A burning wave of exultation ran through her as she remembered those letters—full of weak poison, ridicule of those who trusted him, triflings with the fame of great ladies and jests at their fathers and husbands. Why had she not thought of them sooner and then matters would never have come to this pass? He would have known himself mastered, bitted and bridled. She was in a rage-royal, her nostrils expanded, her eyes darting flames. She swelled and towered as she walked, with the sense of power over not only the man but all the manifold injustice of fate. "Go, go!—and tell him what I say. Tell him I give him a week to consider, and if I don't hear by then—he shall regret it to the longest day he lives. I am no extortioner. Extortion, indeed! Justice is all I ask and will have. I demand my debts paid that I incurred for him—and that is all. But I take no less."

Shot through all his alarm was the thought that he had never seen the woman so beautiful. He comprehended the savage love that would drive the primitive man half mad to crush the resistance of this lovely creature in his arms, ready to fell her either with kisses or blows, or both, and then to caress her back to sweet submission. But submission was far enough from her now. She passed him swiftly up and down, driven like a lioness by the passion in her.

"Tell him that the way he wrote of the King alone would damn him with the people. Tell him how he ridiculed you—your manners, your self-conceit. You think because he uses soft words you can trust him? You'll find your mistake, like me. He'll put Sheridan—anybody—in your place the moment his plans require it, and if you gave your life for him—like me—it would not buy you a minute's compassion."

That stung Fox. So he had ridiculed him, had he? But for all, he could not waver. The Prince was a part of his plans. Without him, the ladder struck away from Fox's climbing feet, all his hope to be the Reformer—the leader of all the young bloods in the nation, worsted. She caught the look in his eye, and would have said more, but he saw the danger and made for the door. He must not hear a word that would make his position intolerable with the Prince. Better be warned but ignorant of details. Near the door he paused:

"You mean, then, Madam, you would use these letters in public? Then it's right I should warn you that I believe legal measures could be taken—"

"Legal?" she cried. "Then let me tell *you* that I'm a woman and can outwit any law man ever made or will. I can scatter them broadcast before the law steps in. I can make the world ring with them and no law catch me."

She could; there was no doubt of it. Even his swift brain could fasten on no way to meet the danger. He must have time—must see the Prince—Sheridan. Yes, she had a liking for Sheridan and he had the most plausible tongue in England. He assumed therefore a weighty gravity and calm which might indicate untold reserves of power to a mind feminine and therefore to be alarmed.

"I recommend you, Madam, to do nothing hasty in your natural anger, but to remember you are dealing with the Heir to the most powerful Crown in the world. This is no light matter. It may be I can obtain better terms for you. I will represent your views to the Prince."

She looked at him with such scorn that he saw this plea hopeless and, instantly doubling on his track, tried another.

"I spoke of your future, Madam, and you laughed. I think, before you damn it, you should consider that it is very much more in your own hands than you suppose. I

have long seen you had gifts and powers which will make you quite independent of the Prince or any other man when you choose to exert them."

She turned in her rapid walk and looked him over. This was a new note—a new thought altogether. It startled her like an electric shock.

"Powers?" she said, and could say no more.

"Yes, Madam, powers. That you are a beautiful woman no one need tell you. The world knows it (she made an angry exclamation). But it is to your mind I refer. You have no ordinary powers there, and, believe me, you will waste your time and opportunities if you grieve over this and consider yourself a broken toy ignominiously thrown away. Take it as a man would take it, and pass on to the next chapter of your life. Ah, believe me, for I know it, there are better things in store for you than to be the chief sultana of a Western harem, and you are one who may well give commands instead of taking them."

The letters slipped from her mind for a second. Was he mocking her misery? That was her first thought. The man's own intellect was so acknowledged that it was impossible for her to credit that in her frivolous existence she had not been a mere object of his contempt. She thought she had read this under his heavy lids. And yet in herself—as the winged thing dreams in the chrysalis—there had been touchings, visitings of a something better which might awaken in the spring, if spring was ever to be hers. Could any other have perceived this distant hope?

"I can't believe you mock such a miserable woman, Sir, and if not—I had no hope left, but you make me suppose it may live somewhere, though out of sight. Will you tell me what you have in mind?"

He looked at her with the cool, friendly regard which he might have bestowed upon another man.

"Why, Madam, if you have the generosity to forgive a slight to your beauty, which to me is the least part of your attractions, you are still more the woman I have always thought you, and though I can't delay at the moment, for I am overdue at a political meeting of consequence, I will come again with pleasure, if you think it worth your while to see me. 'Tis a folly of follies for you to regret what any loose woman in society may pick up when you drop it, and use to the full as well as yourself. Strike out into the road where they can't follow you if they would, and use your good looks, which I don't deny, as a means and not as an end."

He bowed, saying he would have the honour to wait on her when he received her commands and not till then; but she detained him a moment:

"If this is a feint to draw me off the letters, Mr. Fox, you are very much mistook. Do not rely on that. What I said in a rage I repeat now I am cooler. The Prince shall settle my debts—it is barest justice. And if he does not"—she left the sentence unfinished, but her flashing eyes talked a plainer language. He bowed, said no more and got down the stair and out of the house as quickly as he could—confounded.

In an hour he was closeted with the Prince and had laid the matter before him in a consternation not unmixed with gloomy triumph that the man he had always known for the worst kind of fool—folly decked with a superficial brilliance and grace—should have proved himself so entirely worthy of his prevision. At first the Prince denied the existence of the letters.

"She was playing booty on you. I never wrote her but a line now and then about coming or not coming to Cork Street or the like, damn her. Let her give it out, and to hell with the jade!"

"I think, Sir, this is a case so serious that we must not

play with it. I beg you to be candid—we may then extricate you."

"What! Am I not to be believed? I give you my word—"

"No, Sir, no—I don't want your word. I want the truth. A man writes to his mistress inadvertently, no doubt—but in your position—"

"Damn my position!" The Prince swore with a skill and profuseness which mere ink cannot imitate. Fox sat glum, waiting till the tide ebbed. He preferred Perdita's word to the gentleman's before him.

Arrived at the end of a tirade relating to the perfidy of woman, he paused and saw Fox's stubborn incredulity in his face, in his drumming fingers on the table, and took what was invariably the second stage in one of his angers, and burst into tears.

"O Lord, Charles, get me out of it! What am I to do? She has—possibly one letter, possibly more—a man writes to a woman he thinks loves him—he don't reckon his words. My heart is so trustful that to believe either man or woman capable of treachery— It isn't in me, Charles —it isn't in me! Open as the day—you know me. Oh, Charles, this may ruin me with King and Country!"

They had now played off the fireworks, and what Sheridan called the waterworks having followed, the Prince blubbered a few moments more, used his handkerchief, and the way was clear for business.

"The King must be apprised, Sir, of the danger, and I don't doubt that though he refuses money for your debts, he won't refuse to buy these letters. He and her Majesty will perceive that for such matters to be talked of would be most dangerous matter at the present juncture. I understood from Mrs. Robinson that you not only ridiculed and abused the highest personages, but that even

your most faithful friends, those attached to you by friendship and politics, were not exempt."

For the life of him Fox could not resist that thrust, but it missed the mark in the alarm caused by the King's name.

"The King!" he cried. "The last man on earth—the very last. Let the damned public pay it with the rest of my debts."

"It is scarcely a debt we can foist on the public!" Fox said grimly. "The more Mrs. Robinson is kept out of the picture, the better the chance of success. And the schedule is already so long—"

But the Prince broke in and would hear nothing. He protested and swore it should never come to the King, if he died for it. The King hated him, his Mother hated him. Both would rejoice in his ruin. And so forth, Fox sitting by in stern composure until that storm should have followed the other into limbo. Finally Sheridan was sent for to Bruton Street to share in the council.

The facts placed before him staggered him. The woman he knew must have been driven far indeed before—But after all, who understood women? Who could predict the madness of their suicidal anger? The Prince implored him to see her, and he refused. He would not, though he did not say this, mingle by so much as a finger in this dangerous mess. His own name might figure in the letters, and how he could not tell; but outside that "the Prince's prime minister" would not mingle in what might be a most ruinous business. He joined Fox in earnestly pressing on the Prince a letter to the King.

It was the middle of the night before they secured his promise, and then, as neither of them trusted him a moment out of their sight, between them they composed a very manly and humble letter from a prodigal son to a father whom circumstances would oblige to welcome him, whatever his private feeling.

He lamented his youthful follies, promised amendment, alluded with concern to his parents' anxieties—in short, it was a model letter if a word of it could be taken seriously, and Fox went off with it in his pocket and his arm through Sheridan's, and left the repentant prodigal asleep with his head on the table. It was despatched to Windsor in the morning.

But Perdita, alone in her room, fell swiftly from the towering heights of passion into the reaction of a cold terror—not of the risks she faced, no, indeed, but of something more generous, the fear of herself. Could it be she who had snatched at such a weapon—she who had joined the ranks of the skulking wretches who make their profit of the weakness and fear of others? Here was a deeper ruin than any man living could inflict on her, a moral death by her own hand. She sat aghast. Her own company terrified her. What? Were there such black depths in her—and she had never dreamt it. O God, the bewilderment of life, the pitfalls at every step, and only herself to guide her. And such a self! Visions rose before her, thick as motes in a sunbeam. Their first love days in the meadows by Thames—sweet and most sweet. The Queen's pale dignified suffering, Lady Harcourt's generous anxiety, the larger interests, the ruin she had borne her own share in though both of them had avoided reproach to her,—these thoughts wept in her bosom and gave her no peace. At last, after much of the night had gone, she took the little gold case from the place where she kept it, and sat looking at it—the Crown, the garlanded cipher, and thought of the hand that had given it, the sad confidence implied, and sickened to think of the threat that must wound the Queen as deeply, nay, far more deeply than the Prince. She had never dreamt of such a use for them until that instant of her fury with

Fox, and in the depths of her soul she knew she could never so use them.

Indeed, the Queen's face haunted her, alike with griefs she could understand and others entirely beyond her reach. What could a woman like herself comprehend of the enormous difficulties which at best surround the Crown, which at the worst may mean a national confusion and overthrow like that then darkening down over France? What frightful dreads must surround the Queen at night in the stately glooms of Windsor, and behind them the mother's heart pierced with the Seven Swords of Sorrow. As she looked at the case, her heart for the first time quaked with the thought, not of what he had done to her, but of what she had done to him, little better than a boy when first he came into her hands. And under that immense responsibility she trembled and her terrified soul looked about her for some means of atonement and could find none. He had slipped from her hands for ever and the golden chance was gone. Half the night she sat gazing at the dead ashes of the fire and did not feel the cold because of the fever in her veins. At that moment her life appeared of less value than the ashes before her unless some wind of the spirit should kindle them with a spark from some undreamed-of altar. Let them do what they would with her—what matter?

And Fox, with the Prince, was concerting plots and defences against the woman who knew all weapons broken in her hands for the sake of an urging within, which to them would have seemed incredible, preposterous, in any woman, and more especially in a woman who was at best a wanton.

It was two in the morning, a bitter frost outside, when she rose, and with a candle and matches painfully rekindled the fire, and going to a casket, locked in a cupboard, took out a bundle of letters bound with ribbons and

spread them before her. One she singled out and put in her bosom—the first he had ever written her. "Unalterable to my Perdita through life," it ended. The others she took and tore across one by one and fed the fire with them, until the last had fluttered into grey ash. To her not even a temptation now, they might be dangerous in the hands of others. Then, wearied out, helpless as weed flung up on the beach after a wild storm at sea, she lay down on her bed and slept, and found herself wandering in the meadows by Thames, where breathed a dim sweetness of flowers, unseen, but all about her.

CHAPTER XXVI

PERDITA FINDS HERSELF

Wearied with emotion, pale and red-eyed, she wrote a line next day to Fox.

"I wish to inform you in as few words as possible that I shall not make use of those letters as I declared to you yesterday in anger. If there is to be injustice it shall not be on my side, and if nothing else is left me I will cling the more to what honour is left me. I have burnt them all except the first, which binds him to a fidelity none will reproach him for breaking. I request you will make no reference to this when we meet."

When Fox read those words his first feeling was that of exultation. His next was contempt—women, unstable, headlong—who could trust their moods for a moment, inconstant in evil as in good. He showed the paper to Sheridan, who was closeted with him to consider the best means of dealing with her.

"We're in luck's way—the pretty fool!" he said.

But Sheridan read and re-read the paper in silence, and when he looked up, the expression in his eyes was beyond Fox's deciphering.

"I think," he said slowly, "that the worst of women—and this is a good one at bottom—is better than we. Show it to the Prince, Charles. His comment will illustrate me or I am much mistook."

They had the chance, for they waited on his Royal Highness a day later to take his commands on the ever-pressing question of his debts, of which this matter of

Perdita's was a part, and Fox laid the paper before him with an air of sober triumph.

"We have no further cause for anxiety, Sir. Mrs. Robinson has burnt the letters."

He read greedily, then turned on them.

"By God, do you believe the woman? I don't. She'll produce them for a higher price later."

Sheridan half-turned his shoulder upon him, then remembered his manners. Fox shrugged his own.

"Women are women, Sir, yet I think she means it. Now, shall we turn to business? This paper, if kept, can be used to prove that any later letters she might produce would be forgeries on her own showing."

"By God, yes!" said the Prince, delighted. "Lock it up, Charles. Damned pity we sent that letter to Windsor. I told you I was against it from the first, but you and Dick would have it."

"I hope," said Sheridan coldly, "that if his Majesty does make any response to the plea—and I fully believe he will—that that money may be settled on Mrs. Robinson. In my opinion, she has played a worthy part in this matter."

"What, to threaten me—ME—with blackmail and the Lord knows what? To give me all this alarm and compel me to open my affairs at Windsor! Are you mad, Sir?"

Fox gave him a warning look from behind the Prince's back, and Sheridan said no more. But as he went up Cork Street later, which he did purposely, he stayed a second to look at the dim light burning in her window, and stood regarding it with a feeling, half envy, half pity —very complex and hard to unravel. But be it what it might, it moistened his eyes as he turned away at last and made his way to the racket of a great *soirée* which he and Elizabeth were giving in Bruton Street for the Prince, a senseless waste of money in a vulgar glitter and profu-

sion which hit the Royal taste and that of the Prince's friends to perfection. Elizabeth had given up all remonstrance now. The earthenware pots sailed gaily downstream with the brazen, but—they heard the waterfall ahead.

The King paid for the letters with bitter anger and shame, to the last day of his sanity condemning Perdita as an unprincipled adventuress, in which opinion, be sure, Queen Charlotte, after some hesitation, supported him. After all, what good can be expected from an unchaste woman? Should any decent person be surprised? And the money disappeared in the immense gulf of the Prince's debts. After all, he might think it just that she should pay for her fripperies and fal-lals. He had no disposition to do it. And presently all was forgot and swept away in the agitations of his private marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert.

But Perdita, having despatched her letter to Fox, had still no peace. The stain of yesterday lay black on her and what to do she could not tell, for though the letters were burnt, the terror of herself remained, the dread lest any sudden blow (and there might be many) should drive her again into a base reprisal. What would the Queen, Elizabeth Sheridan, Lady Harcourt, any decent woman, think of her if they became aware of this shameful thing? —and certainly it would be spread in the Prince's defence. But in that moment she feared no outward dangers so much as the reaction of her own soul to the attacks upon her.

"What can I do? What can I do?" That was the inward cry, a thirst to escape as if from some city doomed to ruin, and be once more free and herself. What ransom could be too great to pay?

Reparation. That was the one word tolling in her ears.

So for a long time she sat, revolving one desperate expedient after another, and could see no way at all. Lady

Harcourt—her mind brushed her with flying wings in passing, then paused, then settled. What had she said? Words of no especial meaning at the time, but now starting to life, branded on memory with a supernatural brightness, as an oracle. "I have sometimes thought that if the Duchess of Cumberland understood the Queen's agonies—but that is a useless vision."

Useless indeed! Yet—there was a long pause in her reflections. Her mind rose and fell in tumbling waves, breaking on the rock of impossibility, but returning, returning. The Duchess. If she could be approached. Impossible. Yet, if a woman were reckless, if she flung herself into the breach like a soldier in a forlorn hope, why then at least she might win a hearing, if not victory. And that would be something. It was madness, she knew, and yet a madness not despicable as her late actions had been. And so her purpose grew and hardened, and at last, set and white, she took her pen and wrote to the Duchess with all due humility, not knowing what words she could say, blown on a wind of the spirit.

"Mrs. Robinson humbly solicits the honour of an audience with her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Cumberland, at any moment suitable to her Royal Highness's convenience. The urgency of certain circumstances will, she hopes, plead her excuse and secure pardon for this (she is aware) presuming request."

Humble enough, you observe, and yet likely, as she knew, to be met by a most contemptuous rebuff. But she was content to risk that and more. It came as an augury of good, and a cooling balm to the fever that consumed her when the reply was delivered.

"Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Cumberland, in view of unusual circumstances alleged by Mrs. Robinson, consents to receive her privately at Cumberland House this evening at ten o'clock."

After all, she had stood in the Queen's presence and had survived it. Need she so greatly dread the upstart Duchess? And a woman! According to my Lady Harcourt, she must have a heart to be touched, if one could but reach it, Perdita reflected, as she rose and had her hair dressed and the gay toilet that mocked her miseries covered with a long satin pelisse. She wore a hat that drooped over her face, and, she hoped, partly covered the ravages of grief and terror, and so, trembling but praying for the best, had herself carried in her chair to Cumberland House at the hour named.

A lacquey on duty awaited her at a side door, secure from observation, and she was guided swiftly to a small sitting room, luxuriously decorated, which appeared to be the ante-chamber to some larger apartment, and there invited to a seat and left to compose herself as best she could.

It was only the sheer need of the case that enabled her to do this, for she was weak from want of nourishment also, and the glass of wine she had drunk before stepping into her chair had not so much strengthened her as added a fearful beauty to the pallor of her face by brightening her eyes unnaturally and setting a brilliant flush on either white cheek. So she sat and was anxiously revolving in what words she could accost the Duchess, when the inner door opened and admitted no woman, but the detested Duke of Cumberland, smiling in her face.

The revulsion of feeling was so great that it almost sunk her to the earth, and for a moment it seemed that the ground heaved under her feet. It was anger that rescued her, an honest indignation at the trap set, and for the moment it steadied her nerves, as an accomplished danger is ever less terrible than a suspensive one.

She rose and slightly curtsied. The Duke's bow was deep.

"Be seated, Madam. I believe your discrimination will readily inform you why I could not have the pleasure of permitting her Royal Highness to receive you. Explanation on that head would be painful to both parties to this interview. She is gone to a rout."

Before even her mission was begun, she now perceived it hopeless. To this man what appeal could be made either of honour or pity. She therefore refused a chair and drew the pelisse closer about her.

"Your Royal Highness, my errand was to the Duchess, and I was justified in supposing from this reply that I should have the honour of being received by her. Since it is not so, I will depart."

"Not, Madam, until we have exchanged a few words, surely? Besides, that door is secured on the outside. I recommend you to be seated. I do assure you it is locked."

Drive a woman to a certain point, and she becomes dangerous and your match. This is the experience of many rakes, who, having no heart themselves, forget the axiom that the road to lasting victory is through a woman's sensibilities and not her fears. Frighten her, and she comes at you again when chance is on her side.

Perdita immediately seated herself, as he thought, cowed. She was perfectly quiet. He crossed his legs luxuriously and surveyed her.

"You have grown handsomer since last we met, Madam. There is more of the air of fashion, more dignity—if less sweetness. Your lovely shape is more filled out. You move a goddess. I subscribe to his Royal Highness's taste. Raise those concealing lashes, I beseech you. Dark eyes are my delight."

She remained dead silent, but took the jewelled watch from her side and consulted it. The gesture angered his pride. He became cruel.

"I would not grow tedious, Madam. Let us to business.

His Royal Highness came here indignant at the deceit played upon him in your commerce with the Court. We may certainly regard his connection with you as dissolved. Was it your aim to seek a mediator here?"

She would not permit herself to be angry. She felt its danger. Her voice was as cool and steady as his own.

"That was not my aim, Sir. It was one you would not comprehend. And that being so, if I am not to see her Royal Highness, I beg leave to retire."

"Presently, Madam, presently. I congratulate you on your composure. But I also have an aim. Did you know the Prince of Wales is heavily in debt?"

"I know nothing from his Royal Highness on the subject, and it is not my part to guess."

She knew she walked among pitfalls. She knew her enemy watched for every slip, and the danger cleared her brain with every sentence. He proceeded, flicking a speck of dust off his silk stocking.

"That being so, Madam, I think we may conclude you can expect no great provision on parting. You may have made savings, but—"

"That, Sir, is a matter upon which I choose not to make you my confidant."

"Ah—the ant and the cricket? Which person of the fable are you? But seriously, Madam, your brief summer is over. Have you formed any views for the future?"

"Again, Sir, that is a matter on which I will not trouble your Royal Highness. I request that that door be opened."

"Presently, Madam, presently. Do you recall a proposition I made you three years since or thereabouts? It was couched in courteous language and deserved a civil reply."

"It had the reply it deserved."

"It is only a lady of unimpeachable virtue who should

dare to repulse a Prince of the Blood, or, for the matter of that, any gentleman, in such a high-flown anger. It came rather absurd from Sheridan's mistress and the Prince's—"

Silence.

It angered him. He had hoped emotion—even if it were anger. What the silence hid it was difficult to interpret. He unmasked his own guns.

"Madam, blessed are the merciful. I bear no malice for that little spurt of temper. I renew my offer in the exact terms made then. The Prince is a young man, heady and variable. My own affections are calmer and more settled with the difference in years. I renew the offer."

Still she was silent, glancing cat-like about the room to calculate her chances of escape. The glance escaped his prominent short-sighted eyes, and for the moment he thought her listening and smiled inwardly.

"Yes, Madam, the same terms as I offered formerly, and to take over your present residence in Cork Street, which I believe is for sale—the furniture and all that pleases your taste to be reserved as it now stands. And if you will suggest anything further agreeable to you I am here to obey your commands."

To her last day she would never know if this were a mere insult or seriously offered. At the moment she did not so much as consider. Only, as he advanced on her smiling, with outstretched hands, she eluded him, and running swiftly round the table, threw herself against the door that led to the inner room by which he had entered. It yielded, and she almost stumbled into the arms of a pale woman dressed in white who crouched cat-like against the door listening. She sprang up.

The Duchess.

"Mrs. Robinson!" she cried, in the utmost astonishment. And then recovering herself. "What do you here?

How have you the insolence to enter my house? Do you attempt—"

"I attempt to leave a room in which I have been secured, Madam, and what brought me here was this!" cries Perdita in a white blaze of wrath, extending the Duchess's reply to her. The other woman read it in silence, then stared upon her with great eyes in a complete bewilderment. The Duke, advancing and following Perdita, closed the door behind him, the perturbation in his gross face apparent under his forced gaiety.

"The pretty little milliner of Sheridan's comedy, my dear! A door instead of a screen, that's all. Why, I thought you were gone to the rout! The lady came here to beg my intercession with our nephew and I was compelled to refuse. A jest, no more—a kiss stolen in payment. I dare assure you—"

It appeared his Royal Highness was condemned to have his sentences unfinished, for Perdita now interrupted with cool contempt. There was a danger-signal in the other woman's eye, yet she was human and this gave courage to the younger.

"Madam, I trust your Royal Highness has heard every word of the conversation, for then it will need no word of mine to explain the circumstances."

"I have heard," says the Duchess, pale and with glittering eyes fixed on her husband.

"But, my dear," interposing, "you could not be aware of the meaning that underlay them and my intentions. Allow me—"

"Leave the room," says her Royal Highness, pointing a finger to the farther door. "Leave the room, or I swear before the God you disown daily, that I'll expose every one of your machinations, not only to this woman, but to the King. I might as well seek safety that way as any other. In my own house and with such a woman as this

to offer to betray me! Leave the room, I tell you, or it will be the worse for you. I tell you I am dangerous. Believe it and go."

She looked it, all in white and with dark hair disordered about her, and those eyes! She wanted but the dagger in her hand to be an image of hate that would stick at nothing. The man was no match for her any more than he had been in the matter of their marriage. He slunk out, affecting a jaunty air and the tremolo of a whistle to the last. In this man beneath the bully was always the coward at proving.

"Now for you!" cries the Duchess, turning on Perdita. "What do you here, and how do you dare? Is it because the Prince has cast you off that you attempt my husband once more? Speak out!"

But here in turn she met her own match.

"Madam, I sought to see you urgently and had the reply you hold. Is it a forgery? One does not look for that in palaces. Should I have written to you if I had desired to see your husband? I wished to see you because I believed that you had a woman's heart and I could not appeal to it in vain."

"I will do nothing, nothing to mend matters between you and the Prince. What, interfere in a matter so revolting?—Nothing, sure, but the insolence of a bad woman could expect it. What matter is it of mine? I scorn you as the dirt beneath my feet."

Perdita passed the insult coldly.

"That was far from my thought. My own fate I made and can face. My errand was a very different one."

"What was it?" A kind of fierce curiosity prompted the question.

It is to be noted here that as passions rose they dropped the Royal Highness and Madam, and faced each other, two women, stripped to the bone of pretence. Had

they been beasts in the forest they could not have been more simply natural and themselves in every look and motion.

"A circumstance happened not long since in which I was sworn to secrecy, and my promise dissolved the next moment by the entrance of the Prince which revealed it to him. I was honoured by a visit from the Countess Harcourt."

"Not the first, I should judge, by many! 'Tis known you were in the interest of the Court."

"The first. I was never in the pay of the Court, and you know it. My own interest, the Queen's dignity, made such a thing impossible. Let us not waste time in folly. It was a thing very moving to me. Is it outside your comprehension that a mother should tremble to see her son in such company as *that?*"

She pointed to the door by which the Duke had disappeared. The Duchess listened breathless, nor defended her husband from this withering scorn.

"So my Lady Harcourt came on her behalf. She held aloof from me until my sincere grief moved her doubt, and then she begged me, on behalf of one too great to be named, if I had any influence with the Prince to use it to keep the Prince from this fatal house and the company he meets with here. Unworthy, degrading, though mine might be—and I own it—that poor mother thought there was a worse here. I gave her my promise, and I now fulfil it as best I can, for with him I have no influence. I appeal to you to set the Prince free. He has generous moments. I think his case not hopeless if some good woman could lead him."

"Yourself?" The sneer could not be resisted, but fell from Perdita as water from marble.

"Why waste time in mere venom? I am cast off—done with. But consider that wretched mother, more miserable

than other mothers in like case because her son is not only her own but the Kingdom's, and think of the anguish that drove her to send to *me* for help. You call me a bad woman and I own it, but even my heart was pierced. And you—you come of the Luttrells, a great family, and you an Englishwoman! I could not appeal to that coarse boor you have condescended to marry, but an English gentlewoman and a Luttrell will understand what he can't. Honour. Decency. Loyalty."

She paused on a sob of passion. Indeed, witting or unwitting, this was a most extraordinary stroke to make. It addressed the Duchess as no one ever did before or after. The world took her as a *parvenue*, climbed by muddy steps to the neighbourhood of an unwilling King. This half-frantic girl appealed to the noble blood in her and the English strain that had stood by the Throne in a hundred fights and dangers. She took her on her pride and set the miserable Duke far below her feet. The loyal Luttrells!—from a child she had heard those words as a part of the family honour, but thought no more of them than the hatchments over the still Luttrell tombs in the church. Now they sprang out into life. The fury dimmed in her eyes and astonishment took its place. None knew so well as herself the truth concerning her husband.

"You are," said her Royal Highness deliberately, "the strangest woman ever I saw. You at all events don't lack for courage. I will certainly own now that I don't think you came here to entrap my husband."

"Your husband!" cries Perdita, and her tone said all. She dwelt not on that, but flashed on.

"I tell you there is good yet in the Prince of Wales, but I've beheld him sinking almost daily the last year. Drink, cards, women— Think again how his mother suffers in like knowledge."

"I hate the Queen!" says the other, her beautiful face grim as death. "If she were here on her knees, I'd say the same. If she had not been the fool to bring him up in a prison instead of rationally, this had not been. No—you don't move me that way. I like your courage, I own, but you don't move me. Let her suffer. 'Tis the common lot of life."

Seeing this hopeless, swift as lightning Perdita flung back to the other plea. She was not acting, no,—every word was hot with truth, but there is no doubt she controlled her thoughts and emotions and used them purposely as no woman but one trained to dominate her audience could do.

She chose her weapons and with passionate skill.

"Very well. His mother doesn't move you, but your own does. Ah, Madam, I saw your pride stir when I named England! The Luttrells helped to make her—sure a Luttrell won't undo her! Suppose this young man becomes what he promises in your husband's hands and you have aided him? Suppose him King, degraded, sunk below his subjects' esteem. You don't strike at his father and mother for a cheap vengeance, but at the very heart of your people. Oh, Madam, to ruin any soul is much, but his—you ruin millions in it. Would you have people when they see him drunken, debauched, sunk in debt, bestial—would you have them point to a Luttrell as his ruin? Oh, for me, I loved him. But you do this murder for black hate and malice. A Luttrell!"

She stood inspired for a moment as if her light feet trod on air, and then, suddenly, a woman's weakness—she put her hands to her eyes. The silence killed her.

The Duchess stood staring with an expression that no human being could decipher. It was as though she stood poised over a precipice, daring neither the fall nor the retreat.

"Let me go, I've failed. 'Tis hopeless!"

Perdita turned and moved slowly to the door, the pelisse trailing after her on the carpet. It appeared as though she felt her way stumbling.

And still the Duchess stood petrified. Passion, true passion, for the first time knocked at her heart and would not be denied.

"Stop!" she cried, and Perdita turned slowly back. They stood looking at one another in a moment's hush.

The Duchess spoke first, with forced composure.

"I don't deny you've found the way to move me. I am not ashamed of it. I withdraw what I said. I think you are not a bad woman."

She made these admissions as if unwilling. It appeared as if some force stronger than herself dragged them from her. Her eyes were lowered, her manner almost sullen, as she stared at the floor.

"I thank your Royal Highness," Perdita said faintly. "May I beg leave to retire. I am incapable of more."

"A moment yet." There was a long silence. Still, it appeared, the Duchess struggled with some hidden reluctance. Suddenly she broke into a passion of tears. She did not hide them—they rained over her face like running water. So comes a freshet in Spring and carries the ice before it. She stood there, weeping terribly.

"If you're a miserable woman, I'm one also. You see, you *know*, but if you damned yourself one way I did another. Oh, the foulness of life with *that!*" She flung her hand up and out to the door he had gone by.

"It may be you are the least miserable of the two of us," she cried.

She stopped, her mouth and features working so that her beauty was almost eclipsed, yet never thought to hide it.

"Go!" she cried. "I can't bear to be seen thus. No,

stay! What do I care! There's a last word I would say. I'll do what you ask. I'm a Luttrell; they can't take that from me though I debased it into *this*. I'll stand by my own people, and if I can frighten that brute to let the lad go, I will. But, mark my words, 'tis too late. The Duke has set his mark on him deep, and he has a flaw in himself. But you have not failed. You recalled things—things I had forgot."

Her breast was panting so hard that the words struggled out half-choked. Perdita watched her in dead silence, with a kind of stunned amazement. Slowly the sobs ceased, and an exhausted calm took their place, a weariness like that of the other, and for a moment they stood with not a word left to say, speaking with their eyes only till it seemed as if each face caught fire from the other and flamed into a white beauty.

But not a word was uttered, and the minutes dropped by; at last the Duchess put out her hand and slightly touched Perdita's, then turned and rang for her woman. She sank into a chair. The door closed.

Sure the story should end here on the last triumph of a most unhappy woman's life. But if the last, it was also the most real and she knew it. It warmed her heart in the cold years to come.

She knew not at all how she reached home that night, for an exaltation possessed her—a confidence in the ultimate triumph of great things, and for the moment the sordid tragedy of her own life was obscured in the nobler tragedy of her soul. This is the vision. The clouds may, must again close over her, but to have seen is much.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DOWNWARD SLOPE

Human nature asserts itself, demanding the daily round to which it is accustomed and the veils of habit fall about the Brightness and obscure it with everyday thoughts and actions. That interview with the Duchess became for a time dreamlike and unreal. She heard no more of it—it slipped mutely into the past, and she found herself returning without undue emotion to shifts very like those of her former life with Mr. Robinson, and becoming inured to them once more. With a difference. Then, there was always the possibility of employment of some sort for him and her own career on the stage. Now every door was closed. But she postponed thought by employing one of the two women left in the house to sell from time to time a few of the jewels left her, and some of the more magnificent dresses which she was never likely to need again. The smallness of the sums these things fetched astonished her, but that too she took with the rest and made no complaint. Indeed, to whom should she complain? The days, and especially the evenings, were horribly solitary for the passion for reading was dead for the moment, and she must then perforce face her own reflections, but otherwise she thought very little, and merely existed.

One day she went into the Park—a scene of many of her former splendours, and wandered veiled by the side of the ride where crowds had stood to see her pass. As she stood a moment, like one of the common herd by the rail-

ings, the Prince came up riding slowly with Essex and Tarleton. At once she threw her veil fearlessly back and looked him in the face without defiance but piteously, her hands clasped and quivering on the railing. He cut her dead, put his horse into a canter and was gone. It did not wound her as it would have done but lately. That too was a part of the day, to be endured in silence. She went slowly back to the house and sat awhile in solitude and then remembered Fox. He had never been near her since. Had he told the Prince she had destroyed the letters? That at least she must know, for if not it might account for and excuse the Prince's insult. She wrote him a few words, half expecting the repulse of silence, but within an hour his answer arrived. He would give himself the honour of waiting on her.

He came and treated her with courtesy, warming into kindness. Yes, he had told his Royal Highness that the letters were destroyed, and though the Prince could not admit that they contained anything of consequence yet he and all must feel she had taken a very proper step and one which he (Fox) would take care to keep in the foreground when the right moment should present itself. Of her interview at Cumberland House she did not speak to Fox and never would. It appeared to her a matter sacred between her and the Duchess, and most singularly from that time she felt the woman a friend, though one not to be met again this side eternity, and the strangest faith possessed her that the word given would be kept.

That subject of the letters dismissed Fox exerted himself to please, and no man was more able. He used his own extraordinary enjoyment of life to kindle the dead flame in her soul and assure her it was still worth living, and when he left that day he left behind him a faint hope and a vague interest in the future which he said lay in her own hands. He came again next day and often after

that, and was her best doctor, for he warmed her torpor in recalling past scenes of power and promising her others to come. Very gradually and cautiously he revived her belief in her own beauty and charm, and a woman who has faith in these resumes her dropped weapons. He pictured her conquering, re-awaking the Prince's sentiment through his jealousy, though naturally she would never forgive his desertion. She would but prove to him what he had lost.

"You'll never move him by grief, but only by showing him that all men desire what he tossed way like a fool."

That was the tone, and at first it was as unmeaning to her as a parrot's cry. If it even were so, why should she care? Vanity of vanities. But gradually she listened, it warmed her a little. Did Fox—did others believe in her still?—why then she could believe in herself. The Irish blood in her stirred with faint thrillings like the sap in spring. He began to dwell, though vaguely, on the future which lay in her own hands independently of any man, her inborn powers—

"My powers?" she said with irony. "What are they? I can choose a dress and design a hat against any woman in London. Would you have me a milliner? And yet perhaps this is a suggestion worth considering. Certainly I know nothing else I am good for except to wear them."

He disclaimed indignantly.

"Have you forgot the verses I have seen, madam? The songs I have heard the Prince sing and boast who wrote them for him? I dare assure you that such a talent if properly set forth—"

She blushed a little for pleasure. It had never crossed her mind that such a man had noticed her trifles.

"Your kindness says this to cheer me," she said. "Perhaps some day—"

"No, Madam, not some day. Now. There's no woman in London so beautiful as you with a mind to back it. Pretty fools. Grace Elliott— Pooh! Mrs. Fitzherbert—a twice-made widow, seven years older than the Prince and a ninny. Show him you can make your own position. Play your cards well—you hold them, Madam, —and you may yet see him kneeling to you in vain."

It took with her wonderfully, blame her who will. It revived her as a shower a dead plant, for all natures repeated themselves in this sentimentalist, and if she could never be entirely sure herself whether she was saint or sinner, victim or offender, how should others be? Indeed all the emotions of others came natural to her in their society—the one as the other. In Fox's company she was the intellectual crisped with a becoming touch of cynicism, in Sheridan's all heart and romance, and alone—dull, colourless, as water in the dark with no image to reflect. Her beauty returned, increased, became dangerous once more. After all, she was but twenty-two. A defeat is not necessarily final in youth. It is only when it comes hand in hand with wrinkles that a woman need despair. That was his teaching and her own heart echoed it.

But behind all this was the knowledge of his growing power. There were many who looked to him as the first political force in England, and the party strengthened daily. Sheridan followed at his heels. Pitt trembled before him. He promised reform of all the old abuses—the dawn of a brighter day as heralded in France where from a yeasty ferment would certainly be distilled the bright passionate wine of freedom.

Men's hopes clung about him like hiving bees, and when he sat up the hour in Perdita's lonely room, opening as much of his mind and plans to her as he judged proper (and she heard believing he trusted her with all) it opened new vistas to her,—conditions where a woman's mind as

well as her beauty might be servants to a great cause, and give her power from other causes than the set of a curl or the droop of soft lashes. She warmed to it,—and was it wonderful?—was at school, and did not guess it.

"You have power also!" he said, fixing her with those half-hidden, smouldering eyes. "Were you pitted with small-pox, a cripple, your looks vanished, you would still be remarkable. The day will come when men will seek you for that, not this!"—and he lightly touched the soft round of her cheek with his finger. She did not blush, but looked at him with brightening eyes. He assailed a part of her nature which no man had ever attempted to seduce or attack and it responded virginally. She had thought she hated the man and he interested her now more deeply than any she had ever known. It was a triumph to interest him in turn and she had it— Messengers came to the house— "Would Mr. Fox attend the Prince?"—"Mr. Pitt was waiting a visit from Mr. Fox."—Yes, even his political enemies must consult him, and with his own *insouciance* he would bid them wait, and continue talking with her until the sun set, and then slouch off, making an appointment for as soon as she would see him again. But never a word of love. Power. To taste the sharper, sweeter flavours of life, more stimulating by far than those that please boys and maidens in their hot youth—such was his gospel, and he preached it well.

"You are handsomely rid of the Prince, Madam," he said suddenly one day, settling himself into the big armchair he always chose by the fire. "Those who commit themselves to him in the future will have cause to regret it. Behind the most attractive manners in the world there is nothing. To be candid, with Princes there can be nothing. He must play a part from the cradle to the

grave, and if we give him the credit for playing his part with grace we give him the best that can be said of him and may leave the rest unsaid. If however he marries Mrs. Fitz he will probably ruin himself completely, and therefore I shall set my face against it. The Duke of York, who has more dignity and on the whole promises better, is a born Tory and would not lend himself to the part of reform as does the Prince—chiefly, I own, to gall his father, the King. A mad world, is it not? But I was ever of opinion and so told Sheridan long since that his connection with you could not last. You are too superior—too intellectual to please him. He must have a woman whose attainments do not reproach his own."

It was a reviving wine to Perdita. She fluttered like a butterfly whose storm-dashed wings preen themselves in a gentle sunshine. She did not think the man plain now. She read the gross lines of his face as power, the knotted hands held an invisible sceptre. How finikin and foolish beside him were the powder-puff graces of Lord Essex, who also came when permitted and paid his little tribute to her charms. She lent an absent ear to him, and he saw it with a fop's resentment, and could not guess the cause. Fox as a rival with a woman like Perdita could scarcely be taken seriously by a courtier of the Essex stamp. He dreaded Tarleton far more—the gay half-actor, half-soldier, who stormed her door every evening, made her a strictly dishonourable offer on his knees with as much grace as if it had been his hand in marriage, and was shown the door by a pale beauty seeming inches taller in her wrath and scorn than her natural height, her eyes flashing dark lightnings as she forbade him ever to cross the threshold again.

She told it to Fox in a torrent that overflowed discretion, and he commended her indolently.

"There's nothing in the man—a painted rag, the Prince without even his superficial ability. No, Madam, when you ally yourself again, it must be with a man who can comprehend your abilities and need them to reinforce his own. Then—and then only, the future you were born to opens before you."

She glowed upon him. The young phœnix, she felt, was soaring from the ashes of the old. The Prince should hear of her yet—and remember and repent. She brought out a sheaf of her writings and with timidity asked the great man if he would cast his eyes over them and say if there were promise. He took them, and bent his heavy brows above them while she sat, quivering with hope and fright, beside him.

He read aloud a few lines with feeling.

"New objects shall my mind engage,
I will explore the historic page,
Sweet poetry shall soothe my soul,
Philosophy each pang control
Nor will I cast one thought behind,
On foes relentless, friends unkind.
No!—I will breathe the spicy gale,
Plunge the clear stream, new breath exhale,
O'er my pale cheek diffuse the rose
And drink oblivion to my woes."

"That's brave! That's you!" he said, striking his finger on the sheet. "In that spirit should all misfortune be met. It allies a man or woman with the great of all times and races. I admire you more than words can say, Madam. You are a true daughter of the Stoics!"

The beautiful stoic, and never was woman less one, looked up at him enraptured.

"Mr. Fox!" she breathed. "You, you alone have found the balm for my wounds. You alone comprehend me. To you I owe all. I wrote this because you inspired it and showed me the way. It is your teaching."

"If that's so indeed I'll ask you to repay the debt one day with encouragement and counsel in my task—which promises to be a difficult one. You shall be my inspiration. Meanwhile, will you permit me to take these verses home and study them? I don't desire to be hurried in reading them, and when with you the hours pass so quick that there is no room even for these."

Figure her delight when he stuffed his flap pockets with her verses and would take no denial, no excuse. He had brought her word also that as there was no immediate prospect of the house selling the Prince had no objection to her occupying it provided she intruded herself in no way on him. A sum of a hundred guineas came with this news, from the Prince—in strictest secrecy, so he said. But there must be no talk of the bond. She would bring untold dangers and difficulties on her own head if she ventured on that perilous question. She thanked him, sighing, and promised obedience. Every day she had reason to feel how much she owed him. His last word as he left was that the Editor of the *Morning Post* was known to him and he believed some of her beautiful verses might be welcomed in that journal.

As she sat by the fire, looking into its glowing caverns after he was gone, one of the two women left in the house (for she could only occupy a few rooms of it now) knocked at the door, and curtseying told her a lady wished to speak with her. She started up in trepidation. The Countess Harcourt, Mrs. Sheridan—and other alarming possibilities occurred, and her nerves, never strong, played a wild tattoo with her now on any alarm.

The lady was curtseying at the door before she could

make up her mind one way or another, tall, elegant in a long black silk mantle, and throwing back her veil, disclosed—Mrs. Armstead.

Perdita drew herself up proudly. Of all the desertions Mrs. Armstead's had cut her most deeply. She had trusted the woman, had lavished kindnesses on her, and in her position they had been thrown together more as friends than as mistress and maid. And yet without a word of pity or regret she had left her—ill and alone—to face misfortune.

"Madam," she said, curtseying deeply again,—"I know very well that it must seem the part of an impudent woman to visit you, but I have so suffered in hearing of your griefs that I can't stay away, and am come to offer my services if you will do me the honour to accept of them."

Perdita stared at her in amazement. These were the last words she could have expected, and how to take them she knew not.

"Surely this comes a little belated," she said proudly. "You left me without a word, half dying, and not only so—but left all my possessions in your care to be plundered by the base robbers whom I trusted. I have lost thousands of pounds by your flight, and more—for never again will I believe in human nature. No, Mrs. Armstead, I thank you for your offer and have no use for it."

She turned her back and stood looking into the fire, waiting for her to take herself off. Instead, she drew up beside her mistress.

"Madam, it was never your way to be unjust. I was sent for in hot haste for my mother's illness, and I believed, as I suppose all the world did, that the Prince's attachment to you was so secure that the storm must blow over. After nursing my mother I was taken very sick myself—but sure, Madam, you got the letter I wrote you?"

"I have had no letter, nor do I believe you wrote one."

"Then I can only suppose some wretch intercepted it for reasons of their own. Or possibly in the confusion—for I am told the servants left hurriedly."

"They followed the excellent example you set them."

Perdita's graceful back was as unrelenting as the hard silver of her tones.

"Then, Madam, I can only hope they will follow the example I set them now. I understand the house is for disposal and the Prince's protection withdrawn, and I come to offer you my services without wages, and the little savings of which I am mistress, which is fifty guineas, and I would it were a thousand times as much, for if it were it should be yours."

For the first time Perdita turned and looked at her, but incredulously still. She replied to the look.

"Yes, Madam, I mean it. Here is my little all, to be honoured, I hope, by your acceptance," and laid a purse worked with beads on the table, where a few guineas rolled out, one falling unregarded on the floor. Mrs. Armstead's face was certainly paler and thinner. There were dark shadows under her eyes. She looked worn, harassed —as if anxieties had been gnawing at her calm good looks. Suddenly, with an impulsive movement very unlike her, she threw herself on her knees before Perdita.

"Ah, Madam, to the generous heart it is grievous to be suspected of perfidy and ingratitude. Would I have come now if I were so base? I only lately heard of your misfortunes, and then—the moment I was fit to move, I came. If you reject me, at least say you suspect me no more."

"I declare I don't know what to think!" Perdita said, in complete bewilderment, but softening.

There was a pause, and at last she said slowly:

"Pray rise and be seated. I observe you look unwell

and unhappy, and if regret for my troubles has caused it, I thank you. But as to taking you again into my service, I could only pay you a mere trifle compared to what I did, and that only by dismissing one of the women about me now, and putting you in her place. You would have to keep my bed chamber and sitting room in order. No— You see the thing is impossible—a vision. But I thank you none the less, and repent the injustice I did you."

To her astonishment the woman still pleaded to be taken back, and with as much earnestness as if the position were the richest in the world. She would do anything, would prefer to accept no wages, but would glory in the merest pittance if Perdita would but accept her services. She would never forgive herself, would be humiliated to the end of her days if she might not prove herself guiltless of a horrible act of ingratitude. Perdita resisted, but more feebly. After all it was the natural motion of a generous spirit and Mrs. Armstead had never shown herself mercenary. And indeed a little well-trained service such as she was used to would be a welcome relief after the uncouth efforts of the two kitchen girls and the cold discomfort of her present way of living. She softened still more and Mrs. Armstead saw it and caught at every symptom of yielding with such grace, such energy and, as it seemed, affectionate warmth that she carried the day at length. A small wage Perdita stipulated for, the arrangement was to be broken at any day it suited Mrs. Armstead and her savings she must replace in her pocket, and directly it was settled, the woman went upstairs to her own room radiant, and presently returned in her old quiet dress which the long mantle had concealed, and in her hands a tray with chocolate and delicate strips of toasted bread,—and when the night came and she unbound the long locks and brushed them with gentle care beside a

good fire in the bedroom and patted the pillows and warmed the bed to comfort and carried out a thousand little services none but herself would have thought of, it appeared like the dawn of better days to the poor Perdita, and as she laid her head on the pillow she said gratefully how little she had expected such kindness, how gratefully she would remember it. Mrs. Armstead stooped and kissed her hand.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PERDITA LOSES HERSELF

There came no answer to Perdita's message to my Lady Harcourt though she had hoped for a word of some sort. She would have had little hope indeed had she known of the Prince's letter to Windsor, but Fox, partly in mercy, partly from policy, kept that from her, and Sheridan needed no pledge to secrecy. The matter was too delicate, and they feared some explosion had she known the light in which she must appear to the Royal family—Sheridan especially, to whom Lady Harcourt's mission was no secret. A veil was dropped over the episode by common consent.

Nor could she hear whether the Prince still frequented Cumberland House. She would have given much for that knowledge, but Mrs. Armstead declared she knew nothing, and as all the world was busied with its own affairs and had apparently forgot hers she knew not where she could question. Sheridan was engaged politically and socially and did not even reply to a message she sent. Fox also was absent for a while, but sent her "fiffs," as he also called them in the Linley language picked up from Sheridan, to assure her that she was in his mind and he would come when he could.

It soothed her inexpressibly that a man now so considerable a figure in the eyes of Europe should think her, poor and deserted, worth so much as a memory. There was a curious, compelling interest about the man himself also,—his illegitimate royal descent, his utter disregard of public opinion, his mastery of the Prince, the glittering

brilliant circle of his family at Holland House, to become even more dazzling later, his own extraordinary intellect, all gave him a position which reflected its light on any one he distinguished and which she was quick to feel, and she realized this the more as every day set him higher, fearing lest this support too should drop off and leave her poor indeed.

At last, one evening in the sunset, he came, presenting himself with an air of sober triumph.

"I have secured a priceless hour of talk and quiet with you, Madam, after fighting for it with Burke, Sheridan and a few other political gladiators who think all life not devoted to drink should be given to the arena. That has never been an article of faith with me, for friendship is and will be my principal consideration. May I tell you that you look in much better health and therefore in higher beauty? I rejoice to see it. And may I say that late events have set you higher than ever in my estimation?"

The compliment was so calmly offered that it could be as calmly accepted.

"It may well be so. I have had more comfort the last fortnight. My woman, who, I thought, deserted me most cruelly when the house fell about my ears, has returned to her duty and is devoted to my service. It seems I misjudged her."

"Indeed? A score for human nature! Who is the exemplary lady?"

"Mrs. Armstead. You may have seen her about me."

He looked down, smiling a little, as if something amused him, and then said:

"Wonderful indeed! No end to serve, no gain to make, —pure disinterested devotion. Madam, I congratulate you. No doubt it is your own unusual qualities which have inspired it."

She disclaimed that, and asked him if there were any further news of the bond. She would have kept the tremble out of her voice if she could, though it was a matter of life and death to her, for it was abhorrent to her to speak of money in that connection. He shook his head regretfully. "No. I am bound to own I believe that money will never be paid. Of course if Parliament would shoulder his debts— But that would be a difficult one to bring forward."

She turned wincing from the subject.

"Does he still go to Cumberland House?"

"Why, I believe so, but really can't tell. There's no believing a word he says. The other day he owned as much to me. 'My dear Charles,' says he, 'you know I don't speak the truth, and my brothers don't, the Queen having taught us early to equivocate.' "

"That at least I am certain is not true. He might have found a more plausible excuse."

"True, he might, but would not be at the trouble. It is his creed that a Prince of Wales needs no excuses. But let us not talk of him. Here's metal more attractive."

He dived his hand into his pocket and brought out a rouleau of guineas which he placed one by one on the table before her.

"That's yours, Madam. Not from the Prince or any one. Yours. Do you like the look of them?"

She stared bewildered.

"Mine? Oh, Mr. Fox, how?"

"Your verses. Didn't I say I knew the Almighty Jove that directs the *Morning Post* with his sceptre? Well, I called on him to share a bottle of as good wine— But no matter. You know nothing of wine. Never knew a woman that did. And when I had made his heart glad, as the Bible says, I showed him the verses, and damme if he didn't take to them like a child to lollipops. Read them

once, twice, with care. And then I told him the writer, and he said—'Good God, that charming pretty fool! Has she that in her? Then why did she waste her time with Florizel.' Why did you, Madam?"

She beamed on him, she glowed. The guineas were not too many but their cheerful gold faces meant hope, commendation, that she need never blush to own—and much more beside. Indeed she snatched his great hand and kissed it in a kind of rapture.

"If I could pour out my gratitude my heart would be no less full of it,—but, oh, if I could. Oh, Mr. Fox, dear, generous, beloved Mr. Fox, 'tis you for constancy in friendship! A poor, lonely, forsaken woman—and you, loaded down with the world's concerns, could think to do that for me! Ah, but even your kind heart don't guess all the hope I draw from this. Tell me, I beseech you, every word he let drop."

"Why, let's think!" he answered. "He said—yes—that later on he shouldn't be surprised if your neat little turn for satire might not be turned to account in a series of short satirical odes on public subjects in the paper."

"He said that!" Her hands were clasped in joy.

"Yes—but you're to remember that what he has bought will keep him in verse awhile and he named no date. Now, for my part, I am disposed to think that gift and others—for there are many more to back it—might be turned to account by a poor politician who needs a friend, an adviser, more than any editor of any paper—even the *Post*."

"Mr. Fox, you have hundreds!" she said, half retreating.

"Have I one disinterested—one I can trust and count on? Ask yourself, though you know politics too little to be able to answer. Look at even Dick Sheridan,—a man I have made at the Prince's order. He lusts for my shoes

already and will be as sly and slippery a politician in a year as heart could wish—a very hawk at the game. No, Madam, I need a bosom counsellor, a friend. A man of my nature can't exist without it. And on my immortal soul, I know no one but yourself can fill the place. Would you consider of it?"

"Of what?" Perdita asked all in a tremble, scarcely knowing if this was jest or earnest. Those sombre half-hidden eyes alarmed the sleeping sentinel in her soul.

"Why, I thought I had made it plain enough. I want your mind. And because I am a man your body must go along with it, though I own it the lesser bait in spite of its beauty. And remember that if I only hold your mind in possession, the world would none the less believe in the rest of our connection."

She sprang up, and, with her chair between them, stood staring at him with wide eyes of terror. The words struck her like a blow and revived all her dread of men—men who had broken her already and would break her again till she was crushed indeed. Not a word passed her lips. He went on calmly.

"You need not frame your objections. I will do it for you. I am not attractive to a beauty's eyes, my reputation with women is not of the best. You are frightened as a bird just escaped from a snare of falling into another. The very thought of love is at the moment disgusting to you. Well—I own I am not a perfumed fop,—but all the same I have obliged the world to attend to me already. My reputation with women is what it is,—but women also are what they are. I desire to hold none a day longer than it is her pleasure, and there is none with whom I have not parted as a friend. You are afraid of love as of a trap, and no wonder. My offer is not romantic. You are a woman of much more ability than you yourself know. I can train you, form you. You'll

see the world and men as you never saw them from this gilt box, and if you learn nothing from me you'll be the first woman who could say so. I take you to be one who can look at a matter with the reasoning good sense of a man and see your account in it. Of course there are drawbacks. When are there not? But look at it all over before you refuse or accept. I have no wish to hurry you."

"I can't—I can't!" was all she could say, trembling until she shook the chair.

He rose unwieldily.

"Think it over, and let me know within a week. I want you,—you can supply what I lack, imagination and such-like. Sherry has them—I haven't. And though I don't profess to love you in the usual sense of the word, I am your friend and believe you might be mine. But a friendship between man and woman is a half-hearted business without the bond of the flesh also. That cements the union and gives it stability. Even a woman as intelligent as yourself may not see this, but so it is."

He went toward the door, and something in her quailed into terror in seeing him go. It was as though her last hope went with him. In the short time she had really known him he had given her hope, self-confidence, self-respect, courage— What gifts had so-called love ever offered compared to those? And if he withdrew them—

"Don't go yet!" she said in a choked voice. "I have—something to say. No—no. I can't decide yet."

"Do I want you to?" he asked good-humouredly. "No, Madam, not I, and I warn you I shan't break my heart if you say no. I shall merely try to match you elsewhere. I have been a long time hunting for your like all the same. You don't grow on every bush."

It was the strangest wooing, and no doubt he knew (for Charles Fox understood women to the last fibre of their being) that it was the only sort that had a chance with

her at that time. The Prince had sickened her with fear of fine speeches and pretty manners—she would never trust them again. But this ugly bluntness and downright speaking—sure they must ring true in spite of him. No man could hope to succeed by pretending such an address. And was it not a surer dependence than all the sugar-sweets in love's vocabulary?

He turned again at the door.

"Let me be plain all through!" he said. "It's your due to know my intentions as fairly as if you were a man signing a contract with another. Indeed it means a damned lot more to you than to him. If you'll consent to tear up the Prince's bond and let me return it to him so, I'll engage on my part to procure an annuity of five hundred pounds a year for you. That will be the equivalent of the bond. You may see my reason if you consider a moment. It will raise my influence with him prodigiously if I can clear him of that. His conscience pricks him though he hides it. And it's just, if the nations pays his debts (as it must) that you should come under the golden shower. That matter is easy arranged. And in that and all other respects I will do my best for you. Trust begets kindness—and I am a man of my word. I have the honour, Madam, to wish you a good evening."

He went down the stair, smiling to himself like a man well pleased.

"Was ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won?" he quoted under his breath, knowing he had handled her consummately, and pleased with his skill as the angler who sees the fish hooked and floundering.

Mrs. Armstead met him at the foot of the stair and curtseyed with a pleading eye, but he only chucked her under the chin and passed on, rapt in pleasant reflec-

tions. She stood frowning a moment, then turned and ran up the stair to the drawing room.

"Did you not call, Madam?" But the room was empty. Perdita had locked herself in her bed chamber, whence no beam of candle-light shone through the key-hole. Mrs. Armstead applied her ear to it and caught the sound of a stifled sob.

Two days later, as Charles Fox sat over his breakfast, wrapt in a large and not too clean dressing-gown embroidered by a fair hand no longer of interest to him, two letters were brought in, and recognizing the handwriting of both, he chose the man's in preference to the woman's and read it first. He had written to the Prince imploring him to consider the grave reasons public and private against a private marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert both as a Catholic and a commoner married twice before.

"They appear so clear to me," he had written, "that, if I were Mrs. Fitzherbert's father or brother, I would advise her not by any means to agree to it and to prefer any other species of connection with you to one leading to so much misery and mischief."

There spoke the cynic who had certainly had his share in corrupting the Prince both by precept and example, and yet was invincibly right from the royal and national point of view.

The Prince's reply ran as follows:

"My dear Charles, your letter of last night afforded me more satisfaction than I can find words to express, as it is an additional proof to me (which I assure you I did not want) of your having that true regard and affection for me which it is not only the wish but the ambition of my life to merit. Make yourself easy, my dear friend. Believe me, the world will soon be convinced that there not only is not, but never was, any ground for these reports which of late have been so malevolently circulated. I

have not seen you since the apostasy of Eden, etc., etc. I have not time to add much more, except just to say that I believe I shall meet you at dinner at Bushey on Tuesday, and to desire you to believe me at all times, my dear Charles, most affectionately yours, George P."

He read it twice, and then said half aloud:

"Fool!"—and after a while "Liar!" and put the letter aside, reflecting for a long time on the political changes and trouble such a madness must bring on their party. He knew the letter was cowardly evasion. Whoever the Prince deceived it would not be Fox. He knew him to the last tortuous winding of his nature. "These virtuous women!" he said to himself. "Better for the nation the very drab who sells herself for a guinea than the high-born lady who values her virtue at a crown. Here's work that may pull itself and her in the dust."

He sat a considerable time turning this over in his mind.

At last he took up Perdita's letter, and before he inserted a silver knife beneath the seal regretted that no man was present to take his wager that the bird had come to the whistle. He knew it before the few words were before his eyes.

"Your manly candour attracts me more than I can say, but, O my friend, I have much to fear in myself, as much as in you. Come and reassure me."

He folded it and laid it on the table and, ringing for his secretary, plunged into the new difficulties raised by the Prince, dismissing the thought of Perdita entirely until two days later—a neglect she must grow accustomed to very soon if there were to be any connection between them. Then he took his slow way to the house with no doubt that he should find her waiting for him.

She was, and in a fluttering beauty which moved him exactly as such charms always did, but to no outward

demonstration. It was said later of Charles Fox that his spell for women was that his heart was always an impossible world to conquer though it offered a presumption of the wealth of Ormuzd and of Ind if that impossible could be achieved.

She rose to meet him, doubting, faltering.—Had she said too much, too little? Was it her own will to retreat or advance? Had she still any will of her own at all? He greeted her with the calm good sense that had marked him all through.

"I should have come sooner, Madam, but that a new and most alarming folly of the Prince's has engaged all my attention. Believe me, you are well quit of the connection. The unfortunate woman now to be dragged into his concerns will live to repent in dust and ashes."

"I also do that!" said Perdita in a choked voice.

"You have not much to regret. You may yet retrick your beams and flame in the forehead of the morning sky. But this new folly concerns you not though it will be an interesting drama to watch—Sherry has not the like at his playhouse. You may thank God you are not cast for the leading lady. Well, but to come to the point, Madam. Has your heart signed our contract? No, not your heart, though I trust that may follow. Has reflection convinced or dissuaded you?"

She hesitated and stammered, "I d-don't know."

He concealed a smile and replied gravely.

"But then why send for me! What time I have is at your disposal indeed, but I have little."

They sat in silence for a moment, then she said with a sudden passionate earnestness:

"It will be my real fall if I do. The first—my eyes were dazzled, my heart stirred. I acted like one in a dream. Most people could understand and pardon. Who could pardon now?"

"Why, as to that," he answered, crossing his legs with careless ease, "are we to hope to win the suffrages of the foolish majority of men and women? Can they who have no parts comprehend men and women who have? No. Certainly you will be censured. You must set that on one side, and friendship, harmony, easy means, development of your genius on the other. As I rise you shall rise with me according as you deserve it. The alternative, so far as I can see, is to attach yourself to some gay spark who will value your beauty alone. I own it surpassing, but, to be candid, beauty is a fleeting pleasure. A sensible man tires of it and desires the sting of novelty very early."

"But in all you have said—and I have repeated it again and again to myself since I saw you—there was not one word of fidelity. Can you promise me nothing—nothing of that? Is a woman to let herself go so cheap?"

"My dear, what are promises between man and woman?" says he benevolently. "If I promise to love you is it worth the breath that utters it? Or if you give me your word to the same effect, can you swear you'll keep it? You can swear to do your duty by me, but what pleasure could I take in that stiff and rigid performance? It is the peculiar horror of marriage that it is the only contract in the world which the two consenting parties cannot break. It can only be broken by the one rending himself from an unwilling partner. Should we disfigure our friendship by such conditions? No, I will pledge myself to this alone—that if you change your mind or I mine, I will still remain your friend. It will not anger me—why should it? It may be our two natures will fuse and the bond remain unbreakable. If otherwise—we part in all kindness. I offer and ask no more."

Her brain was in a whirling confusion. Was it honour or dishonour to be approached on such terms? Did he

treat her as a philosopher high enthroned above petty prejudices or as a wanton to whom any terms securing a pension must be acceptable? For the life of her she could not tell. The man's face was kindly, at ease, the eyes smiled a little under the shaggy brows—but were impenetrable.

"Do you care at all whether my answer is yes or no?" she ventured at last.

"Should I have asked otherwise?" he answered. "But I must be honest and tell you a man need not seek far for the smiles of your sex. You know it."

She wrung her hands at last in an almost desperate perplexity.

"Oh, if I but knew what to do! If any one would tell me!"

"You could not say more if marriage were in prospect!" he replied with calm irony. "We have at least the comfort of knowing the step not irrevocable. But if the strain is too great, decide against me, and though I must regret it I shall trouble you no more."

He rose as he spoke and went toward the window, looking out that she might have time to recover herself. Below passed the magnificent carriage of the Duchess of Devonshire, swaying on its great springs, with postilions and gorgeous bullioned hammercloth, all coats of arms and quarterings. She leaned out her charming head, fresh and fair as an angel, pink cheeked and lipped, in the great plumed hat which Gainsborough loved to paint, and radiant as we still see her, and beside her smiled the delicious Amoret of whom Fanny Burney wrote, "She *uglifies* every one near her." The two were beckoning to Sheridan, who was walking down the street, and presently swept him into the chariot and carried him off. The glittering, fascinating world of the sirens singing their eternal song—the only world which meant anything

to Fox! He forgot the woman behind him as he looked at the shining pair. Could he have foreseen his own future at the moment how it would have shocked and disgusted him!

There was a light movement—the rustle of a dress, and he turned, lifting his shaggy brows. A tremulous voice crept into his ear.

"You offer so little that I think you may be trusted to keep to such terms," she said. "And I will be as candid. I need your friendship. I see the world dark and empty before me. You ask my mind rather than my heart. I give it."

He put an arm about her and kissed her on the cheek, and later on on the lips.

That night the face that haunted Perdita was not the Prince's, not Sheridan's, but strangely, the Queen's with its expression of austere dignity and suffering. What could her thought be of her son's cast-off mistress when this news should reach her, as it must? Could the reasons be explained or find any acceptance from the woman who best represented wifehood and motherhood in England? No—a thousand times, no. With a face flooded with crimson in the darkness, Perdita could hear her say to my Lady Harcourt: "We should never have meddled with the woman, you see? My son had doubtless good reason—"

For a woman who knows virtue, loves it and forsakes it, weeps in spirit at the feet of all good women and knows herself an exile and an alien in a strange land.

The next day she took the little case with its crowned cipher and, wrapping and securing it with many folds and knots, despatched it by the same sure hand to the Countess Harcourt, with these words only:

"Madam, if I venture to address you for the last time it is only to beg that you will return this august gift to her Majesty because I am no longer worthy to retain it.

You will know the facts too soon. I have not betrayed the trust reposed in me, nor could. I have but betrayed myself. Her Majesty's gracious condescension pierced me to the heart at the time. It would kill me now. Your most obedient humble servant, P. R."

She sent and half trembled on the hope of one kind word, which never came. How should it? The Queen believed her a seller in a base market to the end of her days, and thought of her with cold disdain. Not otherwise.

When the world knew that the Prince's late favourite had become Mr. Fox's mistress, it judged her still a person to be conciliated. As for the Prince, he laughed consumedly, and his relief exceeded even his amusement.

It must be owned that nature had fitted Perdita unhandsomely for the part she was to play in life. Had her sentimentality been of the Joseph Surface type, dashed with hypocrisy or effrontery, it had served her better. It was not strong enough to keep her in the heroic path, and could only torture her when she left it with pangs her lovers could scarcely be expected to appreciate. It had ruined her with the Prince, and no man was less likely to taste it than Fox, who, reading in "The Pilgrim's Progress," as he read in all else, described her to Sheridan as "Mrs. Facing Both Ways," and declared that at the Day of Judgment she would still be found balancing between heaven and hell, with a wistful eye on either, and the Almighty himself at his wit's end where finally to place her.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LIGHTS BURN OUT

For the ordinary romancer it is easy to spin a happy ending and so satisfy the craving for a smile at parting, but with Life, the Master Romancer, it is not so, and he who ventures to borrow his puppets must be obedient to his law. Life laughs at happy endings, knowing that in truth there is no ending at all, and death (so-called) does but lower the curtain to raise it elsewhere—a new stage but the same figures—players a little the better or the worse for their experience in the comedy we have seen.

Perdita knew very well that in her dealings with Fox she had stood where the ways divide and had chosen the easier downward course. Though no courtesan in soul, she had made the courtesan's choice, and must now play the part as successfully as in her lay, for from henceforth retreat there would be none.

I write of it as briefly as I can, for the woman is to be pitied, look at it how you will. And it was the more painful because as Fox's mistress she was still in the midst of the life she had known—with a difference. And it was the difference that stung. The Prince's glamour had fallen away from her. The men of his circle marked the altered circumstance. There was less deference—an easy, slipshod fellowship when she was with them, which drove her more or less into seclusion. The Prince himself she never saw, and would have fled to the ends of the earth to avoid, but understood he had laughed when the matter was broken to him.

She suffered many losses in her connection with Fox.

True, she gained a little from him intellectually. Not that he set out, as he had promised, to improve her. That promise was a love-trick at which satiety laughs, but there was so much wealth in the spilling over of his talk and thoughts that a woman of any aptitude must needs be the richer if she were at the trouble to note it. Otherwise he coarsened his companion, and but for her incurable romanticism would have coarsened her more than he did. But she was never the stuff to hold him. He was too much a sentimentalist himself (outside matters of business) to be held by her sentiment, and indeed, a difference of taste in sentiment is as dividing as a difference of taste in humour.

Perdita had gradually to learn him careless, idle, self-indulgent to the last degree, his ancestor, the second Charles of England, perpetuated in him most strangely in many marked traits. But yet she had grown to need his society much more than she could have wished, since it was so soon to be withdrawn, and so cruelly. He was willing however to remain her friend and kept his word as to the promised provision, she surrendering the Prince's bond (whereby Fox gained much credit with his master) and receiving instead an annuity of £500, the half of which was to descend to her daughter at her death, her debts to be lumped in with the Prince's and shuffled off thus. It was expressly announced that this annuity was to recompense her for having given up a lucrative profession at the Prince's request. She made a point of that. Fox might well consider he had settled her claims on both gentlemen very satisfactorily and at a cheap rate. The debts would be but a snowflake in the Prince's avalanche. But she knew there would be no resting-place in Fox's arms, even if she could have endured it for long.

Glimpses of her survive, driving about in her coach, canvassing in the famous election in Westminster, tricked

out, laughing, doing her utmost to woo the electors with smiles and promises and little cries of "Fox and Freedom,"—indeed with all but kisses. These the butcher and baker might take from a great lady's rose-red lips, if they did but promise her a vote in exchange—the courtesan outbid by the Duchess of Devonshire. Strange, but Perdita could not sink herself so far, and the bawling, hustling men sought the more facile lady and jeered at the harlot who gave herself airs the good-natured Duchess scorned.

Presently the coach was seized for debt, and for a little Perdita drops into oblivion. There was a sufficient reason for this. She had put it out of her power to complain when Fox wearied of her a little more quickly than he had done of others—and if her successor were her own woman, Mrs. Armstead, that should not have shocked and surprised her as it did, for, looking back by the cold light of dismay, she could decipher many signs and portents to which she had been blind at the time. She had not, however, put it out of her power to feel, and it came on her with a terror such as Anne Boleyn must have felt when she discovered her waiting-lady, Madam Jane Seymour, enthroned on her burly tyrant's knee and knew her downfall complete. It is certain that from that moment she lost heart and confidence in herself, though she fluttered awhile, a gaudy moth amongst the painted lamps. She was thankful for notice which formerly had courted her. To her misfortune, she had a clinging romantic strain in her that wound its tendrils about any who showed her a little kindness, and could not easily conceive that they should bear to wound her any more than she would have wounded them, and when it came, it brought a kind of terror with it, as of moving in darkness where dreadful creatures lurked about her.

Fox, however, was immovable. He had done with her

for ever. He recognized in Mrs. Armstead a calm, unwearying strength of persistence which promised the very qualities he lacked. She shed no easy tears, was no epicurean like himself, but with her eyes on her goal, never turned nor wavered, and so secured him at last, having from the first understood him.

Perdita had no other insult to complain of then. Mrs. Armstead met her shame and grief with cool kindness and every offer of assistance, and having gained the victory, had no disposition whatever to misuse it. It was her intention to marry Fox, and after near eleven years probation as a mistress she had made herself so necessary to him from every point of view that the mere hint of leaving him produced the wedding ring, and, what is more amazing, the fidelity of mind as well as body which is supposed always to accompany it and so rarely does. She took the man into complete custody and moulded him carefully into her notion of a good husband and a man rescued from debauchery. There was perhaps the fatigue and satiety of long years of debauchery to aid her here, for vice has its reactionary lilies and languors following on its roses and raptures, and as politics engrossed the man more and more, he needed a quiet home. No high flights of mind or soul, but decency. Mrs. Armstead's art was so consummate that he did not judge himself henpecked, nor was so judged by his friends. She was providence in a silk gown, and probably deserved the height she attained better than most climbers. She was always a remarkable woman in the calm depths of her character. Never a wasted word, nor a rancour, nor a regret. She considered such things the follies of weak natures, and was one to do the deed and abide by it, neither querulous nor remorseful, whatever the result might be. Could she have been duplicated and her duplicate presented to Sheridan, it is possible he might have escaped the Prince's

blight with less ruin of body and mind than befell him, but such women are infrequent—or have not their opportunity.

His fall came not immediately or catastrophically. Life is not thus planned, and he drowned in a slowly rising tide. Elizabeth, breaking under the burden, died, her sweet light extinguished in griefs, and the death of her heart's sister breaking her last stay.

The Linley nest of nightingales was early silenced. One after another they spread their wings and were gone and the nest left cold and empty.

> "He that has found some fledged bird's nest may know
> At first sight if the bird be flown.
> But what fair dell or grove he sings in now,
> That is to him unknown."

They died young, like lights after a festival, slowly extinguished, and left the world darker. They had always seemed somewhat astray on earth, bright truants from some enchanted forest, slipping across the shadows to moonlit glades again, and, almost before the earth-dwellers recognized them, were gone to their fairy fellows, leaving but a flying footprint, a flying sheen of brightness, soon to fade. How could Elizabeth survive so much love —dear kindred hands beckoning her with sweet unforgotten laughter; "A step, only a step, and together for ever. Come!"

Indeed, after her heart's sister died, she saw her always loitering with a backward smile until they should join hands once more and be glad.

Remorse overwhelmed Sheridan as he saw her receding slowly, drawn by love and hopes in which he had no longer part. Her withdrawing sweetness tortured him, and he clung to her as though himself drowning in the tide that

bore her away from mortal sight. He wrote thus to Lady Bessborough in the watches of the night while Elizabeth lay dying:

"She longs after heavenly things. Her mind is becoming heavenly, but her mortal form is fading from my sight and I look in vain into my own mind for assent to her apparent assurance that all will not perish." And again: "My nerves are shook all to pieces. The irregularity of all my life and pursuits, the restless contriving temper with which I have persevered in wrong pursuits, makes reflection worse to me than even to those who have acted worse."

And the immortal calm of her face in death near broke his heart. It had the victorious beauty of one who not only escapes, but has already forgotten the pain that wronged it. He agonized himself and those about him for a short time, but it passed, as from its very violence it was bound to pass, and in a few weeks he had fallen in love, or believed he had, with that fair Pamela in whom Elizabeth's eye had guessed a successor.

"Mr. Rogers had seen Sheridan in company with Pamela (the illegitimate daughter of the Duke d'Orléans and Madame de Genlis). She was lovely, quite radiant with beauty, and Sheridan either was or pretended to be violently in love with her. On one occasion he kept labouring the whole evening at a copy of verses in French which he intended to present to her. However, he understood French very imperfectly."

One would scarcely care to read those verses by the author of "The School for Scandal." The story continues:

"They say Sheridan is in love with and wants to marry Pamela, and whether his red face will charm her is, I think, doubtful."

For wine and its conviviality had begun their inexorable

work, and the brilliant and beautiful Sheridan, who had won the heart of the sweetest woman of her day, was sinking swiftly into a repulsive middle age. Lame Nemesis, not yet quite overtaking him, was hard on his track, though something still remained of that astonishing fire and versatility (in itself a danger) which had brought the world to his feet—if he had but known how to keep it then!

"Not yet had excesses of wine degraded his lineaments, covered him with disgusting eruptions, and obtained for him the dramatic nickname of 'Bardolph.' At sixty he reminded me of one of the companions of Ulysses, who

> " 'Lost his upward shape
> And downward fell into a grovelling swine.'

"Those persons, and those only, who have frequently seen Sheridan at the two different periods, can form an adequate conception of the *metamorphosis* produced in his appearance by repeated and habitual intoxication."

So writes Wraxall—so said others. And the charming Pamela, reminiscent of his Elizabeth in her exquisite youth, turned from him, and by a most singular fate fixed her eyes instead on Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and thus entered upon the romance of love and sorrow which Elizabeth may, with the insight of the dying, have partly foreseen.

But Sheridan must have grace and gaiety about him. He starved without love, beauty, wine to wing the leaden-footed hours. He married a girl not yet twenty years old, an emerald-eyed beauty—Hester Ogle, whom Hoppner painted with a something cold and languid in the "green beads" Sheridan doted upon. On the surface one might argue Elizabeth forgotten, so uxoriously does he write to "My own Gypsey, prettiest of all my eyes ever thought

pretty, dearest of all that ever was dear to my heart"—the "gypsey" with her "low forehead, round plump elbows and flowing tresses." But nothing is forgotten. It lies embedded and crystallized in the rock, and when the rod touches it, the frozen spring of tears thaws and wells out. So it was with him to his dying day. His lost Elizabeth smiled and wept for him in all that touched the real man —who dwelt in much solitude below the surface of triumph and disappointment.

His Hester did not return these sentiments so passionately, though she protested affection and sought to be as good a wife as was possible in impossible circumstances. The perplexed woman separated from "Dan," as she called him, when things became unbearable, returned again, left again, evidently knew not at all how to deal with him or Fate.

Lady Bessborough—his beautiful Duchess's sister, writes to Lord Holland:

"Richardson is dead. Sheridan (if R.'s death does not frighten him) will do the same, for he is never sober for a moment, and his affairs worse than ever. *Pour comble*, he has quarrelled with Mrs. S. A sort of separation took place, but I believe it is partly made up again, but not good friends. I am very sorry for it, for she was the only chance there was of stopping his drinking."

Probably no use in blaming her. Saint Cecilia herself could have done nothing then—or earlier. His miserable bailiff-haunted end all know. How he pawned his silver, even sold Saint Cecilia's picture, Mrs. Sheridan every now and then entreating the treasurer of Drury Lane for a few pounds ("even two would be acceptable"), the world knows. The glory of this world was vanishing swiftly—though in a sort of sad defiance he sent a message to Lady Bessborough that the eyes, once so bright, would "look up as brightly as ever to the coffin lid." His politi-

cal friends were alienated, the Prince had turned his back on his *âme damnée*, a poor reward for long years of service ruinous to mind and body; the House scoffed at him, his Duchess even before her death had withdrawn her sunshine, for he "had now sailed into the north of my Lady's opinion," and hydra-headed money difficulties threatened him at every turn. And then his Duchess died, in all her pride of youth and splendour—her end darkened by her husband's mysterious relations with Lady Elizabeth Foster,—dead in the same year with Fox, and, in spite of the estrangement, leaving Sheridan with a weird sense that he remained the only living thing in a waste land where Death and Silence were enthroned amidst decay—the land where all things are forgotten. He had learnt too late that by the Street of Bye and Bye a man arrives at the house of Never. But the God-belief in us rides the storm, not the sunshine, and on the other side of the black curtain so soon to slide down he might guess a flicker of light, doubtful, but—a hope.

Immitigable tragedy fell round him,—no glimpse of light on moor or forest still to be travelled by failing feet. Too poor a jest for the humour of a god if that were all.

As for Perdita,—the day she parted from Fox made her a reckless woman. In that connection she had fallen far, and now it mattered very little what she did.

The Prince's mistress, Fox's associate, had little power or wish to practise economy, and £500 a year will scarcely cover the expenses of tiffany petticoats and trips to Paris for ladies of her notoriety. Therefore she was heavily in debt, and as a matter of fact she had let herself slip, almost without resistance now, into the arms of Colonel Tarleton. Life is like that, it went its way and took one with it on a current swifter than Thames—what use to struggle?.. She had never been a strong swimmer. It

was not in her. She drifted, weeping sometimes, smiling sometimes, inviting this man also with flights of sentiment to which he could not rise. The world was made for men —a woman must make what she could of it through them, not otherwise.

But before she took up with Tarleton, she made that trip to Paris,—it may be, drawn by the last flare-up of the luxury of the aristocrats before the blackness of the Revolution drowned it. And a strange little glimpse of history, seen through her eyes, is visible for a moment, as she flutters, broken-winged, across that tremendous stage.

For the idle men of fashion, hearing of her coming, had a wish to see the much-famed beauty who had captivated the Prince and the Jacobin Charles Fox, and the infamous Duc d'Orléans, afterwards to be known as *Egalité*, made such gross love to her as his instincts prompted, and even tendered her a fête in his splendid gardens of Mousseau, where every tree was garlanded with her initials in glittering ciphers of lamps as many-coloured as flowers. How far it won her heart we cannot tell. She disclaims the gift. But the Duke, gossiping of the fair foreigner to the beautiful Queen, Marie Antoinette, elicits permission for her to attend the ceremony of the Royal Family's public dinner, that queenly eyes may see the conquering beauty,—and who but Perdita when these glad tidings are brought by the gross Duke! A spark of the old fire flames up. She hurries to the fashionable milliner, Mademoiselle Bertin—later to dress another beauty, Josephine, wife of an officer named Napoleon Buonaparte,—and there bespeaks a dress of dresses,—touching as a *nuance* of Spring herself. "A pale green lustring train and body," we are told, "with a tiffany petticoat, festooned with bunches of the most delicate lilac blossoms, were chosen by Mrs. Robinson for her appearance, while a plume of white feathers adorned her head. The native roses of her cheeks,

glowing with health and youth, were stained in conformity with the fashion of the French Court, with deepest rouge."

A strange scene, this public dinner,—the slender crimson cord alone parting the supernal daughter of the Cæsars from the crowding spectators, the Queen, a vision of high-bred beauty, toying with her fruit and casting appraising glances at the English notoriety self-conscious in her green lustring and glittering tiffany. She whispered to the Duke "loud encomiums" and Perdita blushed and smiled, radiant at this celestial commendation. It remains a singular little miniature of an order of things for ever passed away.

Her Majesty deigned to request through the Duke next day a loan of the picture of the Prince of Wales which Perdita displayed on her bosom, and returned it with the gift of a purse netted by her own royal hands. If all this be true, which it may not be, it is not difficult to see how this Queen's indiscretions helped her downfall, for the poor Perdita was scarcely by this time a wisely chosen subject for royal attentions. As she said of herself, she was too bad to be good and much too good to be bad, a state of heart for which the world makes scant allowance. Tarleton wearied of her. Always she hoped for finality, for peace, security, but that was only to be in the arms of one cold lover who waits with patience and clasps immortally.

Perhaps her sentiment had grown a little vapid, a trifle gushing, and like most men of his time, he preferred a laughing love.

"On with the dance, let joy be unconfined" was a necessity of Perdita's profession, yet one she could never attain to. Strange voices called in her soul, strange hands waved to her and lured her to lands she was never to reach, and Tarleton, who had no more taste for the

unattainable than the Prince and Fox, deserted her also. She was by this time the *femme incomprise* to a nicety and so might have languished through life given over to rose-pink sentiment and self-worship if Fate, standing watchfully at her elbow and seeing her worth a lesson for the sake of some grace in her soul eluding all the brutalizing influences of her associates, had not struck a swift and terrible blow at both. She was seized with a terrible rheumatic fever, which when she was but four and twenty and lovelier in face than ever, reduced her to helpless agony, and while she lived, that stern shadow never wholly lifted. For a while hope left her; she sank under it. And then, slowly, tremblingly, gathered up courage for the first time to look into the eyes of life and death. And, as Œdipus pursuing, and not fleeing from, the avenging Furies found them in truth exorable and benign, so also with Perdita. The world had tricked her. She left it and setting herself steadily to an austerer way began to cultivate the little garden of her mind, no longer with the glittering hopes of success and glory which Fox had inspired, but that she might if possible forget the lost battle. Oblivion with its pale and scentless flower was the one herb o' grace for her. It was a narrow garden, no far horizons, no shining peaks, no moonlit silences or great dawns, but little blossoms grew there, pinched in leaf and bloom, yet with a faint, faded perfume such as hung about her own worn silks and laces.

She wrote reams of poetry very much to the taste of her day, sentimental, floriate, sometimes more than a little vapid, and signed them "Laura" and "Laura Maria." They may be better imagined than quoted, and perhaps their sole value was the self-respect and a kind of consequence they brought her, with some money more than needful in her straits. Indeed they opened the way to the higher flights once predicted by Fox,—satirical Odes

in the *Morning Post* over the more prickly signature of "Tabitha Bramble." I own it a little difficult to visualize the elegant Perdita under that spinster-like title, but so it was. And the self-respect was worth more than the money which, with the fatal facility of her nature, she lent and spent without much heed to the difficulty of making more.

So encouraged she wrote more ambitiously and became a kind of fashionable London Sappho, which failings were decently buried on the score of genius which can scarcely be expected to run at ease in the harness of every-day punctilio. The Bluestocking Club, that frosty altitude of the proprieties, recited her productions in their refined coterie. One hopes that some flicker of humour may have passed over Perdita's own face when she attained that apotheosis, but from what one knows of her it is unlikely. A volume of verse was published by subscription, graced by a list of six hundred subscribers "of the most distinguished rank and talents," and ladies of a virtue like the driven snow allowed themselves "a few pearly fugitives" over the impassioned lay. The inevitable followed; the prose romance which set its seal on feminine fame, and perhaps the happiest time of her life, was when those slim volumes were brought to her as she lay crippled and captive. It bore the delightful name of "Vancenza" and Oh, joy, triumph!—the beneficent public, more true to her than princes and potentates, devoured the whole edition in one glad day and clamoured for five more. Even the stoniest-hearted reviewer dipped his pen rather in attar of roses than gall and crowned her with rosemary for remembrance rather than the inappropriate laurel. In truth, the book was sentimentality at its most languishing —no more. But what matter? She glowed and trembled when a pinchbeck Apollo wooed her as she had done in the arms of her pinchbeck Prince. And Apollo was the more

faithful in spite of his reputation in ancient Greece

It is pleasant to think that the shadows lengthened softly when, still beautiful, but helpless in body, she had her little room decked to receive the distinguished people who waited upon the distinguished authoress. She gave herself the little airs of Corinne and her theatrical experience helped her to the part to a nicety.

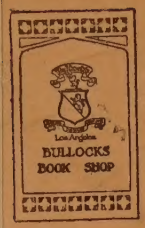
But Fate, smiling now like a tranquil sunset, had yet a truer happiness in store. At the death of her mother, Mrs. Darby, Perdita's young daughter returned to her, resisting the blandishments of a wealthy uncle who offered all the golden gifts if she would but ignore that tarnished mother and devote herself to his elderly wants. But the girl would have none of it. In her eyes, as in those of so many more, Perdita was lovely and lovable to the end. So her last few years were consoled by that young tenderness which must have seemed the earnest and promise of a diviner good, and in her daughter's arms she died, last thoughts and words hers only. She lies in the churchyard of Old Windsor by the gliding Thames, the scene of her first unhappy triumph, and now the quiet soother of her quiet sleep. Yet even in death sentiment pursues the romantic, and her tombstone bears some such Della-Cruscan verses as she herself might have written in her less inspired moments.

Sheridan and she had met in those last days and with what gloom, what terror, the brilliant past must have risen before them—the gulf of dead hopes yawning between—spectres of things that might have been floating with sad averted faces in its deeps. What was there to say? Nothing but mockery or silence could meet that immense ruin. He had fallen the deeper because his height was so infinitely the higher. She, the weaker, had dragged herself from the abyss which had drowned his brightness, extinguished his genius. But

both were broken. She stretched a trembling hand to him and he took it, and they sat silent awhile before he rose and went away.

The Prince's career as George the Fourth is history.

So the darkness swallows these people who loved and suffered, laughed and wept in their brief day. The gods tire of their poor playthings and desire new ones, and death stepped tacitly and took them. Their voices are muffled in distance. The light of their eyes is dimmed with dust. There is no more to say. The story is told, but no hand may write Finis on this or any other, for when the pen is laid down it is but the beginning—the beginning of the blossoming from roots thought to be dead and buried in the dust, but living, eternal.



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